# WHO DID IT?

A SCHOOL BOY'S TALE

REV. H. C. ADAMS, M.A.

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WEST CORNER ST PAUL'S CHURCHYARD, LONDON.

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# WHO DID IT?

OR,

## HOLMWOOD PRIORY.

## A Schoolboy's Tale.

BY

THE REV. H. C. ADAMS, M.A.,

VICAR OF OLD SHOREHAM.

AUTHOR OF "COLLEGE DAYS AT OXFORD," "HAIR-BREADTH ESCAPES," "SCHOOLBOY HONOUR," ETC.

"Which of you have done this?"—MACBETH.

*ILLUSTRATED BY A. W. COOPER.*

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# WHO DID IT?

## CHAPTER I.

### THE WAGER.

"DULL work this!" exclaimed Jerry Taunton, a lad of seventeen or so, whose naturally merry face wore, for the nonce, a most lugubrious aspect. "I wish the weather would at all events make up its mind, whether it meant to be wet or dry!"

"It has made up its mind," growled Rawes, a heavy loutish-looking lad of near about the same age. "It has made up its mind to be wet all the afternoon, and to be nothing else. It is always wet on a half holiday now. I think I never saw a place look more beastly than this playground does on a rainy day!" And as he spoke, he glanced sullenly round him at the grimy discoloured bricks of the playground wall of Holmwood Priory, as Dr Thornton's school was called, and the soaking gravel of the playground itself, in which large puddles were forming. Nor was the prospect much relieved by the

back-ground of sepia clouds and mist, which was all that was visible in the distance beyond.

"Wet all the afternoon! How do ye know that, Johnny Rawes?" cried one of his companions, whose rich brogue at once declared him to be a native of the Emerald Isle.

"How do I know it, Maurice?" returned Rawes. "Why, by using my own eyes, I suppose."

"Your own eyes! Haven't I known afternoons which were nothing but clouds and wet, and yet turned out sunshiny after all? And ain't my eyes as good as yours any day in the week?"

"They must have been afternoons in Ireland, Maurice," observed Jerry Taunton.

"In Ireland! to be sure they were! Where else would they be?"

"I can't say, I am sure," responded Taunton. "In England, you know, when an afternoon is nothing but clouds and wet, the sun, as a rule, doesn't come out at all!"

"I judge ye've never been in Ireland, Jerry," responded O'Toole; "and how would ye know what the weather is like there? I tell ye I've seen the whole of Killarney covered with rain and fog, as thick as a blanket, and in half an hour maybe it would be all bright and sunshiny. More by token, there is the blessed sun himself coming out this very minute to prove the truth of what I say!" He pointed as he spoke to a feeble glimmer among the watery clouds, which, to use a favourite schoolboy phrase, was just enough to swear by. "There he is, and good luck to him," said O'Toole.

"That may be the blessed sun for all I know," said Taunton, "though what there is to make him blessed, is more than I

can see. Anyhow, he is not going to bless us with his company just at present. Hadn't we better go into the house, Graves?" he proceeded, turning to one of his schoolfellows, a tall, powerfully built youth, of rather striking appearance, and whose face would have been handsome and pleasing, but for its air of sullen hauteur. "Hadn't we better go in and try whether we can't amuse ourselves with something? Anything is better than hanging about here, staring at the rain. There are the foils—"

"We've enough of them when Laniski is here," observed Dilke, a boy of the same age.

"And, moreover, it isn't pleasant keeping your head in those masks, like a bird in a cage," observed Payne.

"And it isn't pleasant fighting without them," added O'Toole, "particularly when the button happens to be off the foil. Wasn't my cousin Larry Sullivan—wasn't he run through both cheeks like a lark on a spit, when he was fencing one day, and had to have the holes patched up. But there are the gloves— "

"The gloves are rather worse than the foils," said Rawes.

"Ah, ye're thinking of the facer Temple gave ye yesterday," remarked O'Toole. "Ye shouldn't have challenged him, my boy. I judge he's too much for ye. '*Impar congressus Achillei*,' as Hepburn remarked, ye remember."

"Hepburn's a fool," growled Rawes.

"Is he?" retorted the Irishman. "Maybe, but it was you that looked the fool, to my mind."

Rawes would have retorted, but Graves interposed. "None of this," he said. "I agree with Rawes that the gloves are rather stupider than the foils. But I've got a pack of cards

in my bureau, which I bought yesterday in Walescliff. We can go into my study and have a rubber. That will help out the afternoon till it holds up, as I half fancy it will do by and bye."

"Shouldn't we have Hepburn or Wilkes, or maybe the Doctor himself looking in?" suggested Payne. "It would make the Doctor tremendously savage, if he caught fellows playing cards in the studies. He'd be down upon us like blazes, and very likely give us a black cross apiece—that forfeits a hundred marks, you know."

"Who'd care if he did?" said Rawes. "What signifies losing a hundred marks in the beastly old School Register?"

"I daresay ye don't care, Dick," observed O'Toole. "It doesn't matter to you how many marks Hepburn knocks off your list, seeing ye never have any to knock off. A man might as well threaten to strip a Highlander of his trousers, or Charlie Temple of his money, as you of your marks. But they that have got 'em, don't like to lose 'em."

"Nobody will get a black cross," observed Taunton. "Wilkes and M'Donald have gone to lunch with old Gurdon, and the Doctor and Hepburn have both of them gone over to Wickfield."

"Wickfield," repeated Graves; "then they won't be back for three or four hours at least. Well, then, let us go in and begin."

"Hear, hear," said Taunton, as they moved off. "It's stupid work playing cards for nothing, and I haven't a brass farthing in my pocket to stake, or rather, I have just one sixpence and no more. But it's better than nothing. I say, Stephen," he added, taking Graves by the arm, "if we were only at Wilworth, with the billiard-table and the shooting-gallery,

and all the rest of it, we shouldn't care for the rain, should we?"

"No," returned Graves," we might make out the afternoon pretty well there; but we can't expect billiard-tables and shooting-galleries in a miserable hole like this."

"By the by, talking of Wilworth," said Taunton, "I heard from my cousin yesterday about his gun and pistols. He does want to sell them. He says he'll let you have them cheap, only he would like to know, as soon as he could, whether you mean to buy them."

"What does he call cheap?" asked Graves.

"Thirty guineas the gun and case; ten guineas the pistols," replied Taunton. "Dirt cheap, he says."

"Dirt cheap!" repeated O'Toole; "by the powers, the dirt in your part of the country must be valuable. It must be gold dust, I'm thinking, to fetch that price. I am wondering if ye call that cheap what ye'd call dear!"

"Ah, ye've never seen them, Maurice," replied Taunton; "but Stephen and I have, and we know they're worth the money, and more. And you can pay that, Stephen, to be sure. Your guardian would let you have the thirty guineas for the asking, that is, if he happened to be in a good humour."

"So he might, Jerry," returned Graves, "but unluckily he isn't often in a good humour now-a-days. He made a great row about that horse last holidays, and I couldn't get more than a fiver out of him when I came back this half. But you are right, Jerry. They are well worth the forty guineas, and I should like particularly to have them. I'll write to Clara, and ask her to try and come round him. I'll write this minute, if you'll go into my study and get the cards out."

Meanwhile the other first-class boys had remained behind in the shed, which was the play-place of the school during wet weather; and Dilke and O'Toole, who were not to take part in the rubber, lounged out again to join them. The aspect of the sky had improved a little, but the rain continued to come persistently down.

"Let us do something, at all events," cried Winburne, after a quarter of an hour passed in mingled hope and despondency. "Nothing can be more stupid than hanging about with our hands in our pockets. Suppose we try leap-frog, or fly-the-garter."

"There isn't room for either," observed Wright. "They've often been tried, but it has always been found that there isn't space enough for them. But, I say, did I hear any one say just now that the Doctor and Hepburn had gone out?"

"Yes," said O'Toole, "I said so. I heard it just now in the school-room. They are gone to Wickfield, so Tom Cobbe says."

"Wickfield! are you sure of that?" asked Burton, the head boy of the school. "Do you know what they have gone there for?"

"No," was the answer. "I fancy Cobbe said something about a pupil—"

"A pupil? an old pupil or a new one?" broke in Burton.

"I can't say," replied O'Toole. "Cobbe didn't tell us."

"Wickfield," repeated Temple, a bright, intelligent, but rather roguish-looking lad, the next in school-order to Burton. "Have the Doctor and Hepburn gone there in the old family landau?"

"I believe not," said Dilke, to whom the question seemed

to be addressed. "There is a coach that goes to Wickfield and returns every day. I fancy they have gone by that. Anyway they haven't taken the landau."

"Haven't they?" said Temple. "Then I'll tell you what. Suppose we send a respectful message to Mrs Thornton, and ask for the loan of the landau ourselves! No doubt she'll be proud and happy to lend it, and then we can take a drive into the country. There'll be room for seven of us—Burton, Cressingham, George, and myself inside; Maurice on the box; Jack Winburne and Tom Hibbert in the rumble."

"Hooroo!" shouted the Irishman. "Ye're a sensible child, Charlie! We'll make a morning call at Wandesborough Castle, though, to be sure, it's afternoon now! Lord Wandesborough will be delighted to see us. He'll let us have a turn at his partridges, and give us a cold collation with Roriz port and October ale afterwards!"

"So he would, beyond a doubt, Maurice," cried Wright, "and he'd stand champagne twice round into the bargain. But he'd hardly allow his partridges to be shot in the month of August!"

"And unluckily his lordship is in Italy, and won't return before the month of October," added Winburne, "and there'll hardly be time to write and tell him we are coming. But we really might drive to Hawley Manor, and call on the old lady there. Her peaches and nectarines are not to be despised, and they'll be just at their best now."

"And those early nuts in the Hawley woods are prime articles," added Temple. "They'll be fit to pick now. That is the place for us to go to, if Mrs Thornton will only be so obliging as to lend us the carriage, and order Lawes to drive

us—though, for the matter of that, I should be willing to drive myself."

"In that case I am afraid we should hardly get there," said Cressingham. "One of the horses kicks, Cobbe says, and the other is a bolter."

"Anyway, we shouldn't get admission," added Winburne. "The old lady is ailing a good deal, and won't see any but intimate friends like Captain Gurdon."

"Oh! half-a-crown to the butler would set that all right," said Temple. "He'd show us in, I'd wager; and the old lady would forgive him when she found what pleasant visitors she'd got."

"And where would ye get the half-crown from, my boy," interposed O'Toole. "Turn out your pockets and let us see it."

There was a general laugh, as Temple was notorious for always having empty pockets. The allowance given him was in the first instance scanty, and it was always exhausted at the beginning of every half-year in paying off the debts incurred in the last. Temple bore the laugh good-humouredly. "Never you mind," he said, "I could find half-a-crown easily enough if I wanted it."

"Could ye, Charlie?" inquired O'Toole. "Then if I were you, I *would* find it. What's more, I'd give ye something handsome, if ye'd teach me that same trick of finding half-crowns, when ye want them! By the powers, I find it easy enough to get rid of my money, but as to finding it again that's another matter. Where would I look for it, I wonder?"

"It's all his gammon," said Dilke crossly. "He doesn't expect you to believe it. At least, he must be a fool if he does."

"I don't care whether you believe it or not, Dilke," exclaimed Temple; "but however empty my purse may be at this moment, I could produce half-a-crown this very evening, if I chose."

"Ye could?" repeated the Irishman. "Ah! I see, ye'd borrow it of someone—Wilkes or Hepburn, or maybe Tom Cobbe."

There was another laugh.

"I think I see old Hepburn lending anyone half-a-crown," said Winburne. "Wouldn't he be in a wax, if anyone were to ask him."

"And particularly if Charlie asked him," added Hibbert, "whom he is always pitching into."

"And as for Wilkes," said Wright, "he hasn't half-a-crown in the world to lend to anybody. You must try Tom Cobbe, Charlie, he is your best chance. I am sure he ought to have half-crowns enough, considering what he gets out of the fellows."

"Tom Cobbe won't have anything to say to Charlie after that trick he played him last half," remarked Winburne.

"What, when he electrified the handle of the door, you mean?" said Lander. "I heard something about that. But I was in the sick house at the time, and never knew the rights of it. Tell us exactly what happened."

"Why, Doctor Macrae, one of the swells from Cambridge, had been giving a course of lectures on Galvanism, you know, to the fellows, and had left the battery in the large cupboard in the dining-hall. Charlie managed to get it upstairs into his bedroom. When Tom came with Wilkes to take away the candle at nine o'clock, Charlie had connected the

wires with the handle and lock of the door, and put on the battery so sharp, that old Cobbe roared out he was murdered, and tumbled head-over-heels upon Wilkes, who was coming up the stairs after him."

"That must have been a sight to see," remarked Lander. "Wasn't there an awful row?"

"Oh! Wilkes is a good-natured fellow, you know. And so is old Tom, for the matter of that, when he has had his say. And besides Charlie contrived to palaver Wilkes—"

"You mistake," interposed Temple. "I didn't palaver anybody. I told Mr Wilkes that I was so greatly interested in Dr Macrae's experiments, that I lost sight of all other considerations, in my endeavour to ascertain their correctness—"

"Aye, and you had forgotten that Cobbe might possibly be injured, I remember," supplemented Winburne.

"Cobbe!" repeated Temple. "Who is Cobbe, that anybody should think about him, when the interests of science are at stake?"

"I see," said Wright. "But I doubt whether Tom himself could be induced to take that view of the matter. I fear he would not lend you the half-crown, Charlie, after all."

"I had no idea of borrowing of Cobbe, or of anyone else," observed Temple.

"Then I suppose you'd pawn your watch," suggested Wright. "Of course you could raise money upon that."

"Many thanks, George; but, as I have never had any dealings with pawnbrokers, I don't propose to begin now."

"Then how do ye mean to do it, my lad?" exclaimed O'Toole, impatiently. "You're not going to take to the high-road and rob people of their money, I suppose, or maybe pick their pockets in a crowd?"

"Never you mind how, Paddy," retorted Temple. "I could do it if I chose. That is all I say."

"And that isn't much," sneered Dilke. "A fellow may *say* that he can do anything. He may say he can travel to the moon, or jump over St Peter's Church. But saying is one thing and doing is another."

"True for you," shouted the Irishman. "Didn't my Aunt Biddy, the old neger—didn't she say to me last Christmas, 'Maurice, my boy, I'll give ye a five-pound note if ye'll bring home a prize;' and when I showed her the knife that I had won in the three-legged race last half, didn't the old catamaran say she didn't mean that sort of prize at all, at all, and wouldn't give me so much as His Majesty's likeness in copper. 'Tis a prize I meant for which ye'd have to work,' says she. 'Is it work you mean?' says I, 'and if ye'd been there, ye'd have seen me and Jerry Taunton, too, working like two horses ploughing a bog! If it's work ye want, 'tis a ten-pound note I ought to have, and not a five!' But the old skin-flint wouldn't listen to reason, bad luck to her for it!"

"That's the way she got out of it, was it?" observed Dilke, when the mirth of the party at this narrative had somewhat subsided. "I suppose Temple means to get out of his promise much in the same sort of way."

"Charlie didn't *promise* anything," remarked Wright.

"Certainly not," returned Dilke. "He only gave his word."

"And you'll find that my word is as good as my bond," cried Temple, indignantly.

"Just about," retorted Dilke, in the same tone as before.

Temple was going to answer him more angrily still, when Cressingham, the fourth boy in the school, interposed. He

had been talking apart to his friend Burton, and had caught only imperfectly what was passing. But the loud voices and angry words of the disputants now attracted his attention. He was known in the school as a peacemaker, and he hastened now to prevent what threatened to be a serious quarrel.

"Come," he said, "don't let's have a row; more particularly as there doesn't appear to me to be anything to quarrel about. It's all a matter of opinion. Temple here thinks that he can raise half-a-crown, by some means or other, before supper-time. Well! he has a right to think that, and it doesn't hurt anybody. And here's Dilke too—he thinks Temple couldn't raise it. Well! I suppose he may think that too without offence."

"With all my heart," said Temple, good-humouredly. "Dilke is welcome to think what he likes, so far as I am concerned."

The matter would have ended at this point, but Dilke's ill-temper would not let him be quiet. He thought he had got the better of Temple, and he was not disposed to forego his advantage.

"A fellow has a right, no doubt, to *think* what he likes," he said, "but I don't know that he has any right to *say* what he likes, unless he can make it good. Temple said, that though he hadn't any money in his pocket now, he could contrive to get half-a-crown between this and supper-time without borrowing it, or selling, or pawning anything in exchange for it. That, I think, is one of the random assertions he is always making. And I challenge him to make it good if he can. I don't think he ought to be allowed to get out of it by simply saying that it is a matter of opinion."

"Very well, I *will* make it good," said Temple. "If you choose to call upon me at supper-time, Dilke, I'll either produce the half-crown or beg your pardon. If I do produce it, I shall expect you to beg mine."

"There, there, that will do at all events," said Burton, observing that Dilke was going to reply. "I agree with Cressingham; we have had too much of this already. And while we have been talking, the sky has been clearing, and the sun is coming out. We are going to have a fine afternoon after all."

"So we are," shouted O'Toole. "Didn't I tell ye so now? Here he comes, good-luck to him, as round as my hat! Tom, ye villain, come and open the gate. "We'll all of us be off to the shore, and have a sail or a row."

"You won't have either one or the other, Maurice," remarked Wright. "Old Gunn is up here, busy in clearing out the great bath. He chose to-day, because he thought it wasn't going to clear, and therefore none of us would want to go out."

"Well! where's Jem Gunn, then?" asked Cressingham. "He will do as well."

"Jem's gone up to London about the salvage of a ship that was wrecked three weeks ago. Without one or other of them, you know, we are never allowed to go out."

"That's a bother," said O'Toole; "but never mind. We'll have a game of rounders or a paper-chase on the sands. The rain will have flooded the lanes, but it can't hurt the sand."

"Hurrah! Maurice," shouted several voices, "we'll be off at once. And here comes Tom Cobbe to open the gate.

Charlie, you'll come with us, won't you," added Wright, calling after Temple, who was walking off towards the house.

"I wish I could with all my heart," was the answer, "but I am sorry to say I can't. That beast Hepburn gave me a hundred lines of Virgil to write out this morning, because he said I wasn't attending."

"A hundred lines," repeated Wright. "Why didn't you do 'em while the rain was coming down? That would have been just the time for doing an imposition, if one must do one."

"It was very stupid," assented Temple. "If I had thought there had been any chance of its clearing up, I would have set to work at it at once. But it can't be helped now. If you'll go down to the beach, I'll follow you as soon as I can. There is some of it done, and I daresay I shant be more than half-an-hour. You had better start, for it will be no use waiting for me."

"Not the least in life," assented O'Toole. "Now then, Tom, ye neger, why don't ye open the gate; what are ye waiting for this half hour?"

"If you'll be pleased to listen to what a man has to say, Mr O'Toole," said Cobbe, austerely, "it would be better manners; which as I heard the Doctor say, you was sent here to acquire."

There was a peal of merriment, for the remark in question was a favourite one of the Doctor's, when O'Toole got into one of his frequent scrapes.

"Bravo! Tom," said Temple, "you had him there. Well! let's hear what it is you have to say."

"I've a message from Mr Wilkes, Mr Temple," replied Tom, "or, to speak more correct, from Captain Gurdon and

Mr Wilkes. They told me to say that they were going to walk over to Hawley Manor this afternoon, and any of the young gentlemen, as belong to the first and second classes, was welcome to go with them, if so be," added Cobbe with a glance at O'Toole, "if so be they would behave themselves conformable."

"Draw it mild, Tom," exclaimed Wright; "did Captain Gurdon or Mr Wilkes tell you to say that?"

"Maybe they did, Mr Wright," returned Tom sedately, "and maybe I added it of my own sense of propriety;" and under cover of the general laugh which followed this remark, he retired to his own domain.

His announcement caused general satisfaction. Hawley Manor, which lay at a distance of three miles or so, was the property of Miss Hawley, a lady of middle age, and the daughter of one Captain Hawley, who had served with Captain Gurdon, Mrs Thornton's brother, under Jervis and Howe. Miss Hawley regarded her father's old messmate with so much esteem, that he was not only always himself an acceptable visitor at the Manor, but was allowed occasionally to bring a party of the Holmwood boys with him, who were welcomed for his sake, and regaled after a fashion extremely agreeable to school-boys. Captain Gurdon's invitation was conveyed into the school-room to Graves and his companions, who straightway broke off their game in mid-rubber, and prepared to join the party; from which it soon appeared that none of the first or second class would be absent, always excepting the ill-starred Temple.

"I say, Charlie, this is unlucky," said Wright. "Only fancy your missing this. You had better come, and let the imposi-

tion be hanged. I've no doubt the old lady will give us no end of a blow-out. There'll be her grapes and apricots and peaches. And there'll be the nuts too —"

"Aye, if the gipsies haven't been before-hand with you," said Temple.

"Gipsies," repeated Winburne; "what gipsies? There aren't any about in this neighbourhood, are there?"

"Not now," said Burton. "There was a gipsy encampment some weeks ago on Gossard's Heath somewhere, so old Gunn told us the other day. But they are all gone, I believe."

"How do you know they are all gone?" asked Temple. "There may be some left. But as for accompanying you, George, I am afraid it is not to be thought of. Hepburn would make no end of row if I went out before I had done the imposition."

"There'll be plenty of time to do it after we come back," said Wright, "and Hepburn can't call for it before supper-time. How could he know that you hadn't done it before you started."

"He'd be safe to ask the question," said Temple, "when he heard where we had been. No! it can't be helped, and after all it's my own fault."

He retired into the school-room, just as Captain Gurdon and Mr Wilkes issued from the Doctor's front door; and the whole party set off, with all the eagerness of school-boys, on their expedition.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE GIPSY GIRL.

It wanted scarcely five minutes to supper-time when the boys returned from their excursion. Evening school and prayers followed immediately afterwards. Temple and his friends had no opportunity of conversing together until prayers were over. But there intervened half-an-hour, and sometimes three-quarters, between prayers and the time when the usher, accompanied by the school servant, went round to remove the lights from the boys' bed-rooms. This was a favourite interval for the head boys to get together and have a gossip, or play a game of some kind in their studies. On the west side of Holmwood Priory—which was a very ancient building, and had once been a Convent of Greyfriars, there were still the remains of an old cloister, and four small rooms, believed to have been the cells of the monks. They were not above six feet square each; but the narrow slips which had once formed the windows, had been considerably enlarged in size, and in winter the rooms were warmed by hot-water pipes, so that they formed four very comfortable studies for the four head boys. There was a rule that not more than three boys should be allowed in any of them at the same time. This was generally thought to have been

made for the purpose of preventing a rubber of whist being played in them, though the reader may judge from the last chapter what prospect there was of this regulation being observed. A simpler reason, however, was that three persons were as many as could possibly occupy the rooms without rendering them intolerably close.

No sooner were prayers over than Temple, laying hands on his two cronies, Wright and Winburne, invited them to a half-hour's chat in his study. They agreed, nothing loth, being anxious to discuss the occurrences of the afternoon.

"Well, Charlie," said Wright, as they took the three seats wherewith the room was garnished, to wit a broken arm-chair, a ditto footstool, and a box turned bottom-upwards—"Well, Charlie, you polished off Dilke at supper in grand style—I must say that! Where you got the half-crown from, it is beyond me to conjecture. But you did get it, and that was everything. Dilke thought he had got it all his own way. I never saw a fellow's face fall so, as his did, when you brought out the half-crown!"

"Yes," said Winburne, "I overheard him and Dick Rawes talking about it, as we came home from the Manor. 'Temple will be done this time,' said Rawes. 'This walk over here will floor him. I fancy he meant to go down to Colonel Wilder's, and get the half-crown out of Harry Wilder.' 'Oh, he said, he didn't mean to borrow it of any one,' says Dilke. 'No,' says Rawes, 'but he might ask Harry to give it to him, or Harry might have owed him a half-crown, perhaps. But this going over to Mother Hawley's has bowled him out. Tom locked the gate when we went out, and Temple couldn't get out until ——' 'A fellow may climb the wall of the outer

court,' again interrupts Dilke. 'I know that,' says Rawes, 'but he couldn't get back again. That has been tried again and again, and it is quite impossible. Cobbe might let him out, to be sure; but he's safe not to do that. He owes Temple one, and he'll pay him out. No, Master Charlie will be a close prisoner till we get back. I must say I shall enjoy seeing his face, when he has to beg your pardon, Jem.'"

"Just as we enjoyed seeing Dilke's face when he had to beg yours, Charlie," remarked Wright. "Well, where you got the half-crown from, I can't imagine, and I suppose it is no use asking."

Temple shook his head gravely. "There are secrets which must not be revealed, George," he said. "But come, I want to hear what you did to-day. I hope you had lots of fun. You were out long enough at all events. I thought you were never coming back!"

"Yes, I was so sorry that you missed it, Charlie," said Winburne. "When we came back and found you moping over that book in a corner of the school-room, I was quite sorry for you. It was tip-top fun, I assure you! Couldn't have been better if we had laid it all out a week before."

"What did you do?" asked Temple.

"Did?" answered Wright. "First of all, Wilkes and Gurdon went up to the house. We stopped at the shrubbery gate. Presently down comes the butler with a message. 'Miss Hawley wasn't well. She had heard some news that had upset her.' Somebody or other—we couldn't quite make out who—had been hurt, or was dangerously ill, or something. Anyhow, Miss Hawley couldn't see anyone except Captain Gurdon, and him only for a few minutes. But we were all

welcome to go into the woods and pick any ripe nuts we could find, and at five o'clock we were to go up to the house and there would be luncheon for us—luncheon he called it, though it was rather a late one."

"That didn't signify much," said Temple. "Well done, Mother Hawley. I must say she's a worthy old lady! Were the nuts good?"

"The nuts were nothing to the fruit and cake, not to speak of the negus," said Winburne, licking his lips.

"I don't know that," said Wright. "I never ate better nuts than those in the south corner of the wood, where the trees had had plenty of sun. And there were lots of them, too, more than the whole school could have eaten, if all the fellows had been there."

"Yes," said Winburne, laughing. "If the gipsies that Charlie was speaking about had been there, no one, at all events, would have guessed it."

"The gipsies," repeated Temple. "I was only chaffing you when I spoke about them. I guess you didn't see any gipsies about."

"You're just wrong there, Charlie," said Wright. "We did fall in with one of them—a girl of seventeen or so, I should say. She met us just as we were leaving the wood to go up to the house."

"Was she good-looking?" asked Temple.

"Good-looking! no, I should think not," returned Wright. "A gaunt, ragged, dirty-looking creature as ever I saw. She had on a red shawl, and a large, limp bonnet, which quite hid her hair, everywhere except in front. A more miserable looking object I never saw."

"Indeed," said Temple, "perhaps you didn't notice her very closely."

"Yes, I did," said Wright, "I took stock of her all over, from the holes in her shoes to the discoloured patch on her shawl."

"She wanted to tell your fortunes, I suppose," said Temple.

"For a wonder she did not," said Winburne; "she came with a long doleful story about her family. Her father had been taken ill at Elmer's End with the fever—"

"A jail fever, I should judge," interpolated Temple.

"Maybe," said Wright, "but she said it was typhus. Her mother, she told us, had been dead a twelvemonth, and she had three little sisters and two little brothers—"

"Just the regulation story," again observed Temple, "and I suppose there was no one to look after her sick father and small brothers and sisters except herself, and she hadn't any means of getting a livelihood."

"Well! you're not far wrong there, Charlie," said Wright. "She had been left behind when the other gipsies went away, because her father wasn't fit to be moved, and now that he was getting well, all she wanted was enough money to enable her to join them. The tribe were encamped, she said, about thirty or forty miles off."

"Got up first-rate," said Temple. "Were any of you taken in?"

"Ah! you didn't hear her," remarked Winburne. "If you had you wouldn't talk in that way. We all pitied her, and felt sure that she spoke the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as they say at the Assizes. Old Gurdon in particular—"

"What! was the old Captain as soft as the others?" cried

Temple. "I should have thought that he would have been up to snuff, anyhow."

"I tell you, Charlie," cried Winburne, impatiently, "you don't know what you're talking about. I am quite certain that if you had been there, and listened to her story, you would have subscribed along with the others."

"Aye, Charlie would have given her the half-crown which he brought out at supper, and allowed Dilke to crow over him," said Wright. "Anyway if you had refused, you would have been the only one that did. There was a whole pot of money raised. Old Gurdon shelled out half-a-crown, and Wilkes a shilling—"

"I wonder where he got it from," interrupted Temple.

"I can't say," returned Wright, "but he did give it, and Burton and Graves gave each a shilling, and Cressingham, and Taunton, and Hill, and Lander, and I myself, and ever so many more, sixpence. Even Rawes gave a threepenny-bit, which I didn't think anything in the world would have got out of him!"

"Nor I," said Temple, "she must have made out a very deplorable story, indeed. I can just fancy what she would say. 'Oh good, young gentlemen, take pity upon poor people, that haven't anyone to help them. We are dying of starvation, if you could see my dear little brothers and sisters, all skin and bone—'"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Wright, starting in astonishment, at the altered tones of his schoolfellow's voice. "Why, to be sure, you don't mean—"

"There's father took the fever," continued Temple, "and I can't get him no doctor, and no physic! It's too far for the doctor to come, he says, and Rose, and Betsy, and Susan

haven't had no victuals since yesterday morning; and Tom and Sammy— "

"By Jove, Charlie, that's the girl herself! Why, you don't mean it was you dressed up, to be sure?"

"Oh! gammon," exclaimed Winburne, "that's Charlie's chaff, I can't believe that."

Temple made no answer, but he put his hand into his pocket and brought out a handful of silver. "There's the half-crown you were talking about, which I brought out at supper," he said, selecting a battered, old coin from the heap.

"And that's old Gurdon's half-crown!" exclaimed Winburne. "I remember it well. It was I who took the hat round. Old Gurdon said it was a battered, old veteran like himself, when he gave it. And there's Burton's shilling with a hole through it, and Jerry Taunton's crooked sixpence, which he said would bring good luck. Well! Charlie, you are a rare one, I must say that for you! How in the world did you manage this? Where did you get the clothes from?"

"Oh! it wasn't difficult to manage," said Temple. "You know old Mother Maggots, don't you?"

"What, the old woman that keeps that old rag-shop at the end of Crawley Lane, do you mean?" asked Wright.

"Yes, to be sure," said Temple. "She is not a very creditable acquaintance, but one must not be particular, when one is in difficulties. I went to her house as soon as I had finished my imposition."

"Yes, but how on earth did you manage to get out?" asked Winburne. "Did Tom forget to lock the gate? Rawes declared that he saw him do it. But perhaps he was mistaken."

"Never mind how I got out," said Temple. "I did get

out and that's enough, and I went straight, as I told you, to Mother Maggots. There we looked out the clothes between us. I don't think I was badly got up."

"No, indeed," assented Wright. "You would make your fortune as a dresser at the theatre. But, I say, you hadn't a farthing when we went out, I know. How did you manage to pay for the clothes?"

"Oh, there are ways and means," said Temple, mysteriously. "I got 'em, that's enough."

"I suppose she let you have the clothes on credit," said Wright. "Well, that is more, by a good deal, than I should have expected of her. To be sure, I don't suppose the whole lot of clothes would fetch half-a-crown at a rag shop. But I should judge she was in the habit of dealing with people who would cheat their own mothers for sixpence, not to say half-a-crown."

"I guess your estimate of her is not very far wrong, George," returned Temple.

"And to be sure," resumed Wright, "she did not lend them on credit after all, for I suppose you changed your clothes at her cottage, and left them with her while you went on your begging expedition. So she had pretty good security."

"Well, I didn't do that," said Temple. "She would have had rather too good security then. My coat and waistcoat and shoes and the rest were worth something; and when I came back, I might have found that old dame Maggots had taken them to her uncle's while I was away, and had had their value out in drink. No. I carried away the clothes I had got from her in a bundle—carried them into Hawley Wood, and made my toilette in the middle of some thick bushes."

"And you took the rags back to her when you had done with them, I suppose, and paid your shilling?" suggested Wright.

"No, I didn't. There wasn't time. You see I didn't know that you fellows were going up to the park again. You might have been all just setting out to go home for all I knew, and if I hadn't been in the school-room when you returned, Wilkes would have been down upon me, and reported the matter to Hepburn."

"And you came back here in those rags!" exclaimed Winburne. "You don't mean it, to be sure!"

"I do though," said Temple.

"How did you get into the house?" inquired Wright. "You never came in at the front gate, even if Tom Cobbe had chanced to leave it open."

"I got in," said Temple.

"And where did you dress?"

"In the back part of the shed," replied Temple. "By good luck no one was about, and it only took a minute or two. The gipsy's rags I stowed away in the bottom of my bureau. I shall take them back to Mother Maggots on the first opportunity, and pay her for the use of them."

"Well, Charlie, you are a strange article, that's certain," said Wright, "and were not born on a Saturday night. But there is one thing which I think you have overlooked, and that may be rather a serious consideration. What do you mean to do with the money you have collected from old Gurdon, and Wilkes, and Burton, and the others."

"Oh, I mean to give it back to the fellows, of course," rejoined Temple, colouring a little. "You didn't think I meant to keep it, did you?"

"Not the least bit, Charlie. But has it ever occurred to you that you can't give back the money unless, at the same time, you explain how you came by it. If you give old Gurdon his half-crown, for instance, he'll want to know how the gipsy girl came to give it to you."

"I should explain the trick," said Temple. "Old Gurdon's too good-natured a fellow to be angry. He would laugh heartily."

"Very likely, though I'm not sure whether he wouldn't feel bound in honour to tell the Doctor. He's always on honour on these occasions not to allow any of the rules of the school to be broken. But anyway, how about Wilkes? It's impossible that he, at all events, should wink at the thing."

"No, I suppose not," assented Temple. "I didn't think of that, I confess. Well! then I suppose I must put the shilling back into Wilkes' desk. I can drop it through the crack by the hinge, and he'll find it there, and think it has fallen out of his purse. As for old Gurdon, it will be easy enough to put the half-crown back into his purse. He always leaves it in his breast-pocket when he takes off his coat to play cricket or fives. As for the other fellows, Burton and the rest, I can give them their money back, of course, and tell them how I got it."

"Humph!" said Wright, "I don't know about that. If I were in your place I'd rather that the old Captain, or the Doctor, or Wilkes, or even Hepburn himself, knew what had happened, than Rawes and Dilke and their friends."

"Their friends. What! Graves and Taunton, do you mean?" asked Temple.

"No," said Wright. "Taunton is as good-natured a fellow as

any in the school, though he does belong to that set; and Graves, though he's a sulky and disagreeable beast, for whom I entertain a very particular dislike—he wouldn't do anything underhand. No, I am speaking of young Payne, and Owen, and Burt, and one or two others, lower down in the school, who are always ready to do anything mean that Dilke and Rawes want to have done. I think it quite as likely as not, that if they knew what you had been up to, they'd contrive in some underhand way to let Hepburn know of it, and Hepburn wouldn't be likely to let you off, as you know pretty well."

"As I know *very* well," assented Temple. "He has never forgiven me for sticking pins into his false calves, the first half I was here."

"Did you do that, Charlie?" asked Winburne. "I never heard of that. But you were here a year or two before me."

"Yes, I did," said Temple. "Hepburn is very proud of his legs, you know, especially when he turns out in black knees and tights of an evening at a party. It used to be the common talk in the school, that he wore false calves, but no one knew whether it was true or not. The Doctor gave a ball at the end of my first half, as I believe he had done once or twice before, and invited all the neighbourhood. I was passing by Hepburn's bedroom, and saw his clothes laid out ready for him to dress. I looked in and saw the stockings with the false calves, sure enough. I went and borrowed half a dozen large pins of Mother Edwards—black pins, with large knobs at the ends, and I stuck three in to each calf. Old Hepburn never found it out, until the evening was half over. He had been dancing away no end, and thought the people were admiring

his legs. So they were, to be sure, but not for the reason he supposed. When he did find it out, luckily for me I had gone with the other juniors to bed, and went home by the early coach next morning, long before he was up. He couldn't very well take the matter up after the holidays, and I judge he didn't think it wise to write to my mother about it, seeing that it would be only making himself all the more ridiculous. I am told he was furious when he first found it out, and threatened all sorts of things. He didn't say much to me about it, but I've had good reason to know that he has never forgotten it. No, it wouldn't do to let him know about this business, certainly. But I can't think that Dilke and Rawes would be mean enough to carry tales of this kind to Hepburn or any of the masters."

"You can't?" repeated Wright. "Well, then, I'll tell you what happened two years ago, when Black was here. You remember 'Coal Black,' Charlie?"

"Yes, to be sure," replied Temple, "he was so called because he used to sit smoking in the coal-hole."

"Exactly. Dilke and Rawes hated him like poison, because Black had prevented them from licking one of his friends. Rawes had wanted Tommy Gill to swear to some lie or other; and because Tommy wouldn't, Rawes began thrashing him savagely, while Dilke held him. Black interfered. He wasn't bigger than either Rawes or Dilke, but he had twice their pluck. They durstn't fight him, but they resolved to pay him out somehow or other. And they did manage it, the brutes—cunningly enough!"

"I never heard this," said Temple.

"No," said Wright, "it was only known to one or two—

indeed, I don't think it was known fully to anyone but me, and I had my reasons for holding my tongue about it. But I'll tell you how they managed it. Black was in the habit of sitting in the old coal-hole, as you said just now. The coal-hole in the wood-yard is always empty during the summer. Ashes and rubbish are thrown there, you know."

"Yes, the cellar is not filled till the autumn. No one had occasion to go in there," returned Temple. "That's why Black used to smoke there, wasn't it?"

"Yes, to be sure," said Wright. "Well, one day, Hepburn walks straight into this yard—"

"And caught Black smoking, eh?" suggested Temple.

"Well, no, by good luck he didn't. Black had finished his pipe, and put it into his pocket, not a minute before. Hepburn was just too late."

"But what had Rawes and Dilke to do with that?" inquired Temple.

"They had everything to do with it," said Wright. "You see Hepburn had lost a card case, and was inquiring of all the fellows if anyone had seen it. Now, Rawes and Dilke did know where the card case was, for they had chanced to pick it up half an hour before. I happened to see them do it, though they didn't see me. But instead of giving it to Hepburn, they swore they had seen it lying in the ash heap in the coal-shed; and so, to be sure, they had, for they had put it there themselves. Hepburn went straight to the place, as they had expected; and poor old Black only just escaped by the skin of his teeth, as they say. I said nothing about it, because I couldn't prove my story, and those two fellows would have backed one another up through thick and thin. But I have

never had any opinion of Dilke, or of Rawes either, since that day."

"No," said Winburne; "and you are not singular in the view you take of them. But how is Charlie to get out of this mess? I quite agree with him that he can't keep this money —come what may, he can't do that. Well, he can put Captain Gurdon's half-crown back into his purse and Wilkes's shilling into his desk, but he can't put back all the shillings, and sixpences, and silver threepences which the fellows subscribed into their purses or pockets either. And I think you are right in saying that it wouldn't be safe for him to tell them all about it. I don't see my way, I confess. We are non-plussed here!"

There was silence for a minute or two, and then Wright suddenly exclaimed, "I have it Charlie. You must dress yourself in your gipsy's clothes again, and bring all the money back. You must write a letter to Captain Gurdon, saying that some charitable gentleman has given you a lot of money, and you don't think, therefore, you ought to take the young gentlemen's contributions, or some palaver of that sort, and you can enclose all the cash in the letter."

"Won't that sound very strange, George?" asked Temple.

"Perhaps it may," returned Wright, "but I can't think of anything better. There must be some reason given for the return of the money, and it will be very difficult to give one which would not seem strange. And, remember, when you have once got clear of the premises, you can change your clothes in one of the sheds near the house; and they may make any search they like after the gipsy girl, but they won't find her."

"No," said Winburne, "and I don't see why they should search after her, or what they could bring up against her. They couldn't make out that she was a rogue. Rogues are not in the habit of giving people their money back."

"That is true," assented Temple. "Well, I suppose if nothing better can be thought of, I must do that. What day will be the best for trying it?"

"We mustn't lose time," said Winburne. "Let me see, to-day is Wednesday. To-morrow is a school-day, and we are not allowed to go beyond the play-ground. But Friday is a half-holiday, and there will be the playtime from two to six, as usual. Better say Friday, Charlie."

"It had better not be Friday," urged Wright. "There is going to be a diving match between Maurice and Jerry Taunton at three o'clock that day, and I want particularly to see Maurice dive. But I shouldn't like to miss seeing you again in your gipsy dress, Charlie, nor, I fancy, would Jack either."

"I wouldn't miss it for a five pound note, if any one were to offer it to me," said Winburne; "and besides, I expect Charlie will want our help. Put it off till Saturday, I vote. There is the two hours' play-time on that day, you know. That will do every bit as well."

"Very well. Saturday be it then," said Temple. "And now we must be off to bed, or Wilkes may catch us out of our rooms. Good night, George; good night, Jack."

"Good night, gipsy," responded Wright, laughing. And the boys went upstairs to their rooms.

## CHAPTER III.

### AN ADVENTURE.

"Do you mean to go down to see this diving match?" asked Cressingham of his friend Burton, as they left the school-room, on the Friday following the expedition to Hawley Manor. "It seems to excite a good deal of interest among the fellows, but I don't seem to care much about it?"

"Nor I," replied Burton. "Taunton and Maurice are both of them good divers, no doubt. But when one has seen that kind of thing once, one has seen all there is to see; and the day is too fine to be used up in that way."

"Suppose we take the *Betsy Jane* then, and go to Hardman's Cove for a bathe. It will be just the afternoon for it. What do you say, Clem?"

"It was just what I had in my mind, Fred. The day is deliciously warm, and Hardman's Cove is my favourite bathing place. And we can take the *Betsy*, I have no doubt. Old Gunn finished the bath yesterday, and will be able to go with us."

"Done with you, then," cried Cressingham. "We'll be off at once then, before any one engages the *Betsy Jane*. We'll take old Ned with us. He's been tied up during all this rainy

weather, and Mrs Thornton asked me to take him for a run."

"All right," said Burton. "I'll go and fetch the towels, if you'll untie him."

The boys set out for Gunn's cottage; Nep bounding before them, overjoyed at his recovered freedom. He was a splendid animal, a Spanish blood-hound, and had been brought when a puppy from Cuba, by Captain Gurdon. The Captain was fond of telling the boys how the animal had come into his possession. He had been staying at the house of a Spanish planter, during one of the insurrections of the negroes, which at that time were common enough in the island. Señor Menotti had been besieged in his own house by the blacks, and had only beaten them off by the help of Captain Gurdon and some of his officers, who by good fortune were guests in the house at the same time. The Captain had contrived to send a message by a slave boy to his own ship, which was lying in a small bay at a few miles distance. The number of the negroes, as well as their ferocity, was overpowering. The house was like most of the West Indian houses, so constructed as to render it very difficult to defend it against an attack. The blacks soon forced an entrance, and drove the inmates from one storey to another, until they had to take refuge on the roof. Finding it difficult to dislodge them from thence, the assailants were on the point of setting fire to the house, when a volley of musketry stopped them. A strong party from the *Neptune*, Captain Gurdon's ship, had arrived in the very nick of time. Señor Menotti was profuse in his thanks, and overwhelmed his deliverers with gifts. Captain Gurdon would accept nothing but a blood-hound puppy, which had greatly

taken his fancy, to which he gave the name of "Neptune," in memory of the occasion. The animal was one of tremendous power, but as is often the case, so perfectly gentle and docile, that not even the most timid boys in the school were afraid to play with it. It was of course a great favourite, but no one, unless with special permission, was allowed to take it out with them.

Burton and his companion soon reached old Gunn's cottage, but here a disappointment awaited them. The old man was sitting in an arm-chair by the fireside, but he did not get up to greet them.

"Want to go out in the *Betsy*, do you, Mr Burton?" he said. "I'm afear'd I can't go with you. I've got the plumbago so bad this morning, that I feel as if I was broke in half. 'Spect I caught it in cleaning out that bath in the rain last Wednesday. I scarcely think I could creep down as far as the beach, but I'll try if you wishes it."

"You mustn't think of that, John," said Burton. "It's a bore, but it can't be helped. We must put it off, that's all. You'll be right again by Wednesday, I make no doubt. The weather seems likely to last, and we can go out then."

"You can go now, sir, if you like. The *Betsy's* all right. She has her sails and oars aboard, and she's all but afloat."

"Ah! we wanted to go to Hardman's Cove. But we mustn't do that without you or James. Hasn't Jim come back?"

"No, they's keeping him up in London, one day after another. He was to have been back last Wednesday, so he wrote me word; but he ain't come yet."

"We can't go then, that's certain," said Burton.

"Can't go to Hardman's Cove," said Cressingham; "but we may go and sail about in the harbour. That will be better than nothing. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, if you like it," answered Burton. "We can sail up and down from the lighthouse to Grimes's cottage, and the wind will just suit. Come along and we'll get the boat off. Stop, though, we mustn't take Nep. We are not allowed to take him in the boat, unless Gunn or Jim are with us. We must shut him in your cottage until we are gone, and then let him run home."

They took leave of the old man and went down to the beach. Here they pushed off the *Betsy Jane*, and getting aboard, hoisted the sail, and went away with a slanting wind towards the mouth of the harbour. It was not so pleasant an excursion as the one they had planned, but it was very enjoyable nevertheless. There was a warm sun, a pleasant breeze, and a very lovely landscape around them. On the seaward side lay a range of high limestone rocks, with clefts here and there, through which the deep blue of the sea was visible. To landward, the fishermen's cottages were grouped in picturesque confusion round the little early English church, with the narrow streets of Walescliff proper stretching up the hill beyond. At a short distance the grey walls and heavy chimneys of Holmwood Priory presented themselves, half hidden in the wood, by which they were environed.

The Priory was a very ancient building, once a religious house, as its name implied. It had passed through many hands, and had fallen gradually into decay. Some forty years before, it had been bought and converted to its present use by Doctor Thornton's father. At the entrance of the harbour

appeared the "Lighthouse Rock," a huge mass of limestone, surmounted by the lighthouse, which marked the entrance into the rather dangerous harbour of Walescliff. Beyond, for miles, extended a lofty range of almost perpendicular cliffs, and in the far distance, the outline of Curlew Island, with the roof of the convict prison, situated upon it, sparkling in the sun.

"A glorious day isn't it, Clem?" said Cressingham. "A bathe in the Cove would have been quite perfect. What possessed old Gunn to have lumbago to-day of all days in the year!"

"I wasn't thinking of the bathe so much, as of the last time I was there. I went with Jack Thorn and poor old George Alford. It was just before they both left."

"Ay, George was as good a fellow as ever lived," said Cressingham. "I wasn't as thick with him as you were, Clem, but I don't think I ever liked a fellow better. And Jack, too, was a good-natured fellow, if he hadn't been half mad. They say he might have had the Manor after Mother Hawley's death, if he hadn't put her back up."

"It was with the old Squire he quarrelled, not with Mother Hawley," said Burton. "After that last row old Hawley settled a hundred and fifty upon him for his life, and then cut him out of his will, and swore he'd never see his face again; and he didn't either."

"Didn't old Hawley leave the money after Jack's death, to be given as a prize or something to the fellows here?" asked Cressingham. "I've heard such a story, though it doesn't seem very likely."

"It's true, though," said Burton. "Mr Knyvett told my

aunt so. He's her solicitor, you know. I know exactly how it happened. Old Thornton went over to remonstrate with the Squire, and ask him to give Jack another chance. He's good-natured enough, you know, is the Doctor. Old Hawley wouldn't have it; but he was pleased with Thornton nevertheless. 'You're a good-natured fellow, anyway,' said the Squire, 'and I'll tell you what, I'll leave the money after this young scamp's death, to be given as a prize to your boys. It's a hundred and fifty pounds a-year, you know—that'll be fifty pounds a-year for three years, to your head scholar every year. It'll be the making of your school, Thornton.'"

"It may be the making of the school, forty or fifty years hence," observed Cressingham, "but I don't see that it's likely to benefit the Doctor much, seeing that he's old enough to be Jack's grandfather almost."

"That's what my aunt said," rejoined Burton. "But Knyvett didn't agree with her. 'Young Thorn's with his regiment,' he said, 'fighting Soult in the Peninsula. He's as likely as not to be knocked on the head any day.'"

"Well, he hasn't been," said Cressingham. "He went through the Peninsula without a scratch, and though he got a wound at Waterloo, it wasn't serious."

"I'm not sure of that," said Burton. "Didn't you hear the other day, when we were over at the Manor, something about a relation of Miss Hawley's who was ill?"

"Yes," said Cressingham; "but I didn't hear that it was Jack Thorn."

"Old Hicks didn't say who it was, but he said something about an old wound, and I had a sort of fancy that it might be Jack he was speaking of. But I say, Fred, we have passed the lighthouse rock, we must go about again."

"So we have," assented Cressingham. "I was thinking about Jack Thorn, and wasn't looking out. Take in the sail, Clem. I'll get out the oars. We had better row back to Grimes's."

Burton complied, and began lowering the sail, when he suddenly stopped. "Hold hard there," he said, "do you see those two fellows out there on the Quoits? They are hailing us, aren't they?"

Cressingham looked round. At the distance of a few hundred yards, there was a group of five rocks, bearing a rude resemblance to quoits. They were almost entirely uncovered at low water, but when the tide was at its height, only the tops of the two highest were visible. On the summit of one of these, two men, naked to the waist, were now standing. They were apparently shouting at the top of their voices, but the distance was too great for any words to be heard.

"They want us to take them on board, Fred," said Burton. "I expect they have been bathing, and the current, which is very strong just there, has carried them out to sea. Look, they have nothing but bathing-drawers on. What ought we to do? It's against rules to go beyond the lighthouse, but these fellows will have to stop several hours on the rocks there if we don't take them off."

"Yes," said Cressingham, "and one of them may be hurt or taken ill, for all we know; and it would be no joke waiting there till after dark. I don't think anyone could blame us for fetching them off."

"That's very much my opinion," said Burton. "If we left them there, and anything happened, we should blame ourselves, even if others didn't blame us."

"All right," said Cressingham. "Hoist the sail again, and I'll take the rudder."

Ten minutes or so sufficed to bring the *Betsy Jane* to the spot. As they approached nearer, they could see that the men did not wear bathing-drawers, as Burton had supposed, but trousers of some coarse, dark material, cut off apparently at the knees. They were strongly-built, hard-featured fellows, and their appearance was so little that of bathers, who had been carried out by the tide, that Burton, as the boat drew near, turned the rudder, intending to hold some parley before he took them on board. But one of the strangers noticing the manœuvre leaped into the water, and, catching hold of the bow, scrambled in before either of the boys could prevent him.

"Hold hard, my hearty," exclaimed the new comer. "You mustn't do that. Here, give me the rudder." As he spoke he made his way to the stern, and snatched the tiller from Cressingham's hands. "Now then, Tom," he shouted, "jump in here as quick as you can. We've lost a heap of time, and I wonder they haven't been after us before this. Just hand me the file, though. We may chance to want that again."

The man addressed as Tom complied with his companion's request. He leaned down from the shelf of the rock as the boat was brought close to it, and handed him a short file, which the other thrust into the pocket of his trousers. He then scrambled down into the boat, which he shoved off from the rock. Then he seated himself by the side of the other man, and all four stared awhile at one another.

"You don't like our company overmuch, I judge," said the man at the helm presently. "Well, we don't want yours.

You can get out on them stones there, if you want to be shut of us."

"That's pretty cool," said Cressingham, "seeing that the boat is ours."

"And that if we hadn't come to help you, you'd have had to stay on the stones yourselves," added Burton.

"The boat is yours, is it, sir?" asked Tom, in a much civiller tone than his comrade had used. "Well, sir, we don't mean to steal it, I assure you. We only want to borrow it for a few hours, and then you can have it back again. Come to help us? So you did, sir," he continued, turning to Burton. "Well, we're obliged, and will do you a good turn some day, I daresay. But just now we're obligated to take care of ourselves."

"We've a deal more need to be taken care of than they have," growled the other man, whose name they presently learned to be Bill.

"You are stronger than we are," said Burton, "and if you choose to seize our boat we can't prevent you. You had better tell us plainly what you mean to do."

"That's plain speaking, anyhow," returned Bill, "and I'll be as plain in my turn. We are going over to Dead Man's Point. You know that, I suppose?" As he spoke, he and the other man seated themselves, took the oars, and began rowing."

"Yes, I know Dead Man's Point," said Burton.

"Very well. If you two choose to sit quiet, you can go with us. If you don't, you can swim ashore if you like, we won't prevent you."

"Can't you put us ashore at Walescliffe?" asked Cressingham. "We can send Jem Gunn round to Dead Man's Point

and fetch the boat back. We don't want to go to Dead Man's Point ourselves. It's against the rules of our school."

"Can't help that," replied Bill surlily. "Maybe we'd fall in with folk there that wouldn't be willing to let us go again. You'd better make up your minds at once, whether you are to go with us or swim ashore."

"We must, of course, go with you," said Burton. "We can't help ourselves. I am not sure I could swim that distance with my clothes on, and am pretty certain that Fred couldn't. I think I understand pretty plainly who you are. You are two convicts who have escaped from Curlew—"

"You'd better not trouble yourself about that," growled Bill. "If you do, you may happen to wish you hadn't."

"I don't mean to trouble myself about you," said Burton. "I don't see what would be the good of my doing so."

"No more don't I," retorted the man. "Take the tiller, and steer straight for the Point."

By this time the boat was abreast of the lighthouse, and the two lads looked somewhat anxiously in the direction of the shore in the hopes that some of the fishermen's boats might be coming out. But there was none in sight; and they resigned themselves as composedly as they could to their situation.

In about an hour they passed the Green Holm, as a long, low, richly-wooded island, lying in the middle of the estuary of the Spene, was called. The boat had made rapid way, both the rowers being not only powerful men, but experienced oarsmen. They had approached within two hundred yards or so of the landing-place, when the man, who had been throughout addressed by the other as Bill, suddenly ceased rowing.

"Stop a bit," he said, "I should like to know what's going to be done now."

"What should be done?" answered Tom. "We shall get ashore at the Point, and then these young gents can have their boat back again. With this wind they'll get home in half-an-hour."

"So I suppose," answered the other; "and if they puts the constables on our track, the ride through Spene Wood—if they gallops as they's pretty sure to do—ain't much more than another half-hour."

"They won't put the constables on our track," said the other man. "I know they won't."

"You're always soft, Tom; and we shouldn't have got into trouble, if you hadn't been. Anyway, let's make sure as they won't blab. Look here, sir," he continued, turning to Burton, "will you promise as you won't blow upon us?"

"I shan't say anything at all, unless I'm asked," answered Burton.

"I daresay, but what if you are?"

"I'm not going to tell lies to please any one," rejoined Burton shortly.

"No, sir," observed Tom, "and we don't want you to."

"That won't do," cried Bill. "Just look here, Tom. I'm not going to be nabbed and sent back in irons, and maybe get six dozen into the bargain, because you choose to be soft-hearted."

"What do you want to do then?" asked Tom.

"Put these youngsters ashore on the Holm, and leave the boat at the Point—"

"Leave the young gentlemen maybe all night on the island

there," exclaimed Tom, "and rain coming on as likely as not!"

"There's the cottage, isn't there, and old Ball and his wife?" said Bill.

"They'll be gone home before now, Bill. It's as likely as not, anyway."

"Well, I don't want to keep them there all night, only an hour or two. They can go and hail old Ball, and get home by Spene Wood, or wait here till some one comes to the Point, and shout to 'em."

"They might wait till to-morrow," answered the other. "No, I can't have that. If it hadn't been for them, we should have been on the Quoits now, or perhaps nabbed and took back. I'm not going to be so unthankful as to do what you want. I'd rather be took back, and let them do what they like to us than that."

"You're a fine fellow," said Burton, who had been listening to their conversation; "and I'll promise you this—if I'm asked, or if Fred here is asked, we won't say where we've been or what we've been doing at all, at least not for another week to come. We can only be punished for being out after lock-up time, and we shan't care about that."

"You're a gentleman, sir," said Tom. "Your word is quite enough. Come, Bill," he continued, turning to his companion, "you hear what the young gentleman says. Let us get on as fast as we can, and give them the boat back again. I tell you I will have it so," he proceeded in a more determined tone, as he noticed that the other still seemed unwilling to comply. "I will have it so, I say; and you know I'm not to be trifled with, when I make up my mind."

Bill obeyed, though evidently dissatisfied. "And how, I should like to know," he said, as he recommenced rowing, "what is to become of us when we do land? Not a halfpenny in our pockets, and no clothes but a pair of stockings and half a pair of trousers a-piece. You think so much of these young gents having to pass a night out of doors in the rain, though they have got all their clothes and their warm boating-jackets into the bargain. What do you think is going to happen to us? How are we to get food or shelter either?"

"We must watch our time," said the other, "and do the best we can. Anyway, here we are. Now step ashore, and we'll wish these young gentlemen good evening, and thank them for their kindness."

"Hold hard," said Burton. "The evening is warm, and we shan't want our boating jackets. Do you mind lending yours, Fred? I don't, if you will. I'm sure this good fellow will return them."

"Not the least," said Cressingham; "and here's a handkerchief, too, which one of them can tie round his head. I agree with you, I am quite sure they will be returned to us."

"You are very good, sir," said Tom. "I won't deny as the jackets will be very useful, because if people saw us all but naked in this way, they'd be asking questions, and there ain't no cottages between this and Wickfield—"

"Hold your tongue, stupid," broke in Bill. "What do you go mentioning names for?"

"Never mind, Bill," was the reply; "these young gentlemen are not going to say anything that could hurt us. We shall be very much obliged for the use of the jackets," he continued, "but I don't see how we can send them back to you."

"I'll tell you how," said Burton. "You say you are going to Wickfield. I'll give you a note to a friend of mine who lives there. He'll take the jackets and send them back to us on the first opportunity." He took out his pencil as he spoke, and wrote a few words on the envelope of a letter. He then twisted the paper up, wrote a direction on the back, and handed it to Tom, together with the two boating-jackets. "There," he said, "is the note, and here are the jackets; and here is a shilling to get you some bread and cheese at the Plough and Harrow, which is half-way between this and Wickfield. If you've had nothing to eat all day, you'll be wanting it."

"God bless you, sir, for your kindness," said the man respectfully, "and good-night to you both."

He was just moving off when Cressingham called to him. "You had better look at the direction of the note," he said, "and be sure you can read it."

The man complied, and Cressingham noticed that he gave a little start of surprise as he read the address. "Oh, yes," he said, "I know the house. It is as well known as any in Wickfield."

Once more bidding the two boys good-night, the men moved off, and soon disappeared in the wood. Cressingham hoisted the sail, while Burton took the helm. The breeze which had freshened at sunset was now sufficient to carry the *Betsy Jane* before it with even greater speed than Tom had predicted, and little more than twenty minutes had passed before they landed off Gunn's cottage. Leaping out, they made fast the painter to the great windlass, and then ran up at the top of their speed to the old fisherman's door.

"We are a good quarter of an hour behind time," ob-

served Cressingham, glancing at the church clock as they passed.

"It can't be helped," said Burton. "Here Gunn, old chap," he continued, putting in his head at the cottage door, "give us our coats and hats as quick as you can. Hallo! what's this?"

This last exclamation was caused by Neptune, who burst out of the house as soon as the door was opened, and began bounding round the boys. "Why, Gunn," cried Cressingham, "what made you tie him up instead of letting him go home?"

"I didn't tie him up, Mr Cressingham. He wouldn't go. He's been a-keeping watch over your clothes, and wouldn't leave 'em."

"What a bore," said Cressingham. "We shall get into a worse row for keeping Nep out.

"It can't be helped," said Burton again. "We must make all the haste we can now."

They hurried on accordingly as fast as they could run, until they reached the Priory gate, which they expected to find locked. But to their surprise, it was standing open, and as they entered the gravelled path, Dr Thornton, accompanied by Graves and Taunton, came up from the opposite direction.

"Oh, so you've found him, Burton," exclaimed the Doctor, as his eye lighted on Neptune. "Do you know where he has been?"

"Down at Gunn's cottage, sir," answered Cressingham. "Gunn told us so."

"Gunn. Why didn't he bring him up here?" asked the headmaster.

"He's laid up with lumbago, sir, and can't walk a step, or I have no doubt he would."

"That's it, is it? Well, since the dog is found, we needn't trouble ourselves further. Come in at once, and do you, Cobbe, go and call the others back. It must be quite supper time."

"Well out of the mess, Clem," whispered Cressingham to Burton, as they took their places at the table, "I never remember a narrower escape than that!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### ANOTHER NARROW ESCAPE.

"ARE Jerry and O'Toole going to have their match to-day?" asked Temple of his friend Wright, as they came out into the play-ground after morning-school on the following day.

"Yes," returned Wright. "Maurice came back last night. I wish his uncle had chosen any other day in the year, rather than yesterday to come and see him. Yesterday would have been a prime day for the match, bright, warm, and clear. To-day is dull and cloudy, and it's as likely as not that it will rain. I don't care half so much for the match to-day."

"That's lucky, George," said Temple, "because I can't put off returning this money any longer. I didn't very much like leaving it till to-day, but I can't leave it till Monday. If you want to see the fun, you must give up the diving match."

"Well," said Wright, "I don't care if I do. At all events we'll do your business first, and then there may be time to get down to the beach and see the end of the match. As the fellows are all gone, you'd better fall to work at once."

"All right," said Temple. "I'll fetch out the properties." He went into the house and returned in a few minutes with a bundle of clothes, which he unpacked in a corner of the

shed. "Here they are," he said. "The first question is, where am I to put them on?"

"You can't do that here, that's certain," said Winburne. "One of the ushers might come out, and if he was to see a young woman, as he'd suppose, putting on her clothes here in the shed, he'd be a good deal astonished."

"I should like to see old Hepburn's face," said Wright. "It would be worth seeing."

"So should I," assented Temple, "if the person caught were anybody but myself. Well! if I'm not to dress here, where am I to dress? I can't get up into my bed-room—"

"No, and if you did, and Mother Edwards chanced to come upon you, it would be rather worse for you, than if old Hepburn caught you," said Wright. "I think I see her, if she found a gipsy in one of the bed-rooms! She'd go off into fits and bring all the house about her ears. No, Charlie; you must go and dress in the cart-shed in the corner of the Doctor's field. You won't be troubled with any visitors there, unless it happens to be a cow or two."

"The shed will do well enough," said Temple. "But how am I to get round there and carry these clothes? I can't carry a bundle like this down the road; somebody or other would see me."

"You'd better drop them over the back wall, and then go round and pick them up," suggested Winburne.

"Yes," said Temple, "but how am I to get to the back wall? There's the coal-yard and the servants' yard. It won't do to go into the servants' yard. Even if Mother Edwards doesn't happen to be about, there's the cook and Tom Cobbe. Mother Skinner's always grumbling if any of the fellows go into

the servants' offices, and Tom Cobbe owes me one, which I expect he won't be slow to pay."

"Well, the coal-yard then," said Winburne. "Why not go into that?"

"Nep's tied up there," said Temple. "The Doctor ordered his kennel to be put there last night."

"Nep wouldn't hurt you, Charlie," said Wright. "He knows all the fellows, and besides you're a particular friend of his."

"That's just it," said Temple. "He's been fastened up for nearly two days, and is mad to be loose. He'd think I had come to untie him, and make such a row that he'd bring Hepburn or Wilkes out as likely as not. No, that won't do; we must contrive to carry these things somehow or other. Look here. Here's this fishing basket. That will hold the shawl, and the shoes and stockings. I can carry that and my fishing-rod, and if any one met me he'd think I was going out to fish."

"To be sure," said Wright, "and here's my boating jacket. I can wrap the gown in that, and hang it over my arm. And here, Winburne, you take these other things. You can poke the bonnet into the crown of your hat, and we can carry the other things in our pockets."

"That will do first-rate," observed Winburne, "and we'd better be off as soon as possible. You talked of Hepburn catching us just now, George; but that he won't do. He has gone out somewhere with Captain Gurdon. I saw them go out together just after school was up, but they may only have gone into the town for something, and will be back again in half-an-hour or so. We'd better lose no time."

"Done with you," said Temple. "We have got all the things, I believe. Let us be off."

They hurried down the road accordingly, until they reached the lane, which led to Doctor Thornton's field, in one corner of which the cart-shed was situated. Here Winburne remained to assist in Charlie's toilette, while Wright hastened back to keep watch over the premises and give Charlie warning if anything went wrong. Presently Winburne returned, and almost immediately afterwards Temple appeared, in his gipsy attire. Knowing, as he did, his schoolfellow's adroitness in such matters, he was nevertheless astonished at the completeness of the illusion.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "Charlie, you'd take in any Bow Street runner in England. I can hardly believe you're not a regular gipsy tramp. Well, be quick. We've been longer about this than I expected. Come into this corner here, Jack. Tom Cobbe's face will be a thing to see, but he mustn't catch sight of us."

They niched themselves in a remote corner, while Charlie Temple proceeded to ring the house bell; and after one or two pulls, the school servant made his appearance. He was greatly scandalized at the appearance of the visitor.

"Now then, young woman," he exclaimed, "what is it you please to want? Come to beg, I suppose, or maybe pick up any coats, or umbrellas, as may happen to be left in the hall. The Doctor don't allow no tramps here."

"If you please, sir," said Charlie Temple, dropping a respectful curtsey as he spoke, the execution of which nearly sent the boys in the corner into fits of laughter; "if you please, sir, I have a letter here for Captain Gordon."

"Gurdon, young woman," corrected Tom, sternly; "you should learn to call people by their right names, especially when you belongs to the lower walks of society."

"Gurdon, sir, I beg your pardon," said Temple, humbly, and making a second curtsey. "Gurdon, no doubt, it is, and will you be pleased to give it into his own hands."

"A letter, eh," said Tom, eyeing the document suspiciously. "And there's something in it, too," he continued, as he handled it. "You're sure there aint nothing wrong in it—no pison, no 'splosives—nothing that can harm a man."

"Nothing at all, I assure you, sir," said Temple, "if you will only please to take it."

"Very well, young woman," returned Tom, loftily, "you don't 'spect no answer, I suppose."

"Oh no, sir," said Temple, "I wouldn't presume so far."

Tom nodded approval of the frame of mind which had dictated the reply, and taking the letter vanished into the house. Temple, on his part, glad to be released, was making the best of his way towards the gate, when he found himself suddenly confronted with Captain Gurdon and Mr Hepburn, who had just returned from a visit to the constable's house. The two gentlemen had had an angry dispute, on the subject of the adventure of the previous Wednesday. Mr Hepburn who held the curacy of the district, in which Gossard's Heath was included, had insisted upon it that there were no gipsies remaining in that neighbourhood. There had been a gang no doubt, he said, during the spring, and the early part of the summer; and his parishioners had complained to him of depredations committed on their farm-yards and hen-roosts. But the magistrates had cleared them off some weeks pre-

viously, and he was certain that there could be no such family as Captain Gurdon had described to him. The Captain on his side was equally positive; and after one or two passages of arms, the combatants had agreed to refer the matter to Bartholomew Baines, the head-constable at Walescliffe. They had repaired together to his residence as soon as Mr Hepburn was released from his school duties for the morning. But the result of the interview had not been satisfactory to either party. On the one hand Bartholomew had endorsed Mr Hepburn's statement that the gang of gipsies had left the neighbourhood two months before, having had good reason to believe, that if they remained much longer, very unpleasant consequences would ensue. They had gone, so far as the constable knew, to a distant part of the county, and were not likely to return. On the other hand, he couldn't answer for it but what one family might have been left behind in one of the old half ruinous cottages on Gossard's Heath. The property, he said, belonged, as Mr Hepburn knew, to a proprietor who lived abroad, and didn't trouble himself much about it. People might remain there for weeks without anybody knowing it. If so be as the Captain had seen a girl who said she was living in one of these cottages, he didn't see why it shouldn't be true. Most likely it was for the matter of that. She must have come from somewhere, and where else could she have come from?

This compromise, like most other compromises, failed to satisfy either of the belligerents; who, it should be noted, were old antagonists, and made a conscience of quarrelling on all available occasions. On the way homewards the dispute between them broke out more sharply than before.

"I told you so, Gurdon. I told you the gipsies had all been gone since the last week in June. I went over and visited the cottages myself, and couldn't be mistaken. But you never will——"

"When did you visit them?" asked the old sailor, gruffly.

"When? Why, about the end of June or beginning of July."

"I daresay you did," rejoined the Captain. "Most likely at that time the man hadn't been taken ill with the fever, and he and his family were sleeping out, as these people do, under a hedge. It was only when he became ill that they shifted into the cottage."

"I tell you," rejoined Mr Hepburn, angrily, "I go by those cottages every week of my life, and sometimes two or three times a week. Do you think I shouldn't find it out in all those weeks, if one of them had been inhabited?"

"No, I don't," said the Captain, stoutly. "There would be no smoke, because, as the girl said, they couldn't afford a fire, and the man and the children being all laid up ill, none of them would be about. Why *shouldn't* the girl's story be true, I should like to know? Hepburn, tell me that."

"The girl's an impostor," rejoined Mr Hepburn, more angrily than before, "palming off a heap of lies, in order to wheedle money out of you—that's why."

"She's no more an impostor than you are, Hepburn," retorted Captain Gurdon, with equal acrimony. "I'm convinced she spoke nothing but the truth, and you won't persuade me to the contrary."

"We shall see, we shall see," said Mr Hepburn. "Only let me come across her, and I'll soon prove that you are

wrong, Captain. Why, I was over there only yesterday afternoon, and went into all the cottages. There wasn't the slightest trace of any one of them having been occupied for ever so long. No, no, she was a tramp, who had made up a story to get money out of you. She was off as soon as she got it, and you may rely on it we shall never set eyes on her again."

As he uttered these words they were entering the gate of the Priory, and the first object that presented itself to their eyes was the gipsy girl herself, ragged stockings, bonnet, and red shawl, with the discoloured patch on the shoulder, just as Captain Gurdon had described her.

"There," exclaimed the Captain, triumphantly, as his eye lighted on her, "by Jupiter, there's the girl herself! I told her, if she required further help, to come here and ask for me, and so she has done. What do you say now, Hepburn?"

"What do I say," retorted the usher, greatly provoked at his unexpected discomfiture. "Why, I say I shall make it my business to find out who and what she is. I shall insist on her being taken before Colonel Wilder or Mr Wolford to give an account of herself, or be committed as a rogue and vagabond. That's what I say!"

"And I say I won't suffer it to be done," cried the Captain, his face growing red with anger. "She has come up to see me, and by my order, and I won't have her meddled with."

"You won't object to my sending for Baines anyhow," said Mr Hepburn, moderating his tone somewhat as he noticed that Gurdon was seriously angry. "Stop there," he added suddenly, as he noticed that the gipsy girl, who had been gradually sidling towards the gate, was now apparently on the

point of making a bolt for it. "Stop there, young woman. You can't be allowed to steal off after that fashion without giving some account of yourself. If there is nothing wrong about you, you needn't be afraid of meeting the constable. Look here, Captain Gurdon, you, of course, are as anxious as I am to find out the truth. Will you go down to Baines's house and ask him to come up here, while I keep watch over the girl."

"No, I won't," growled the Captain. "If you choose to bring the man up here I can't help it; but I think it's a shame to treat a respectable girl so, and I shan't stand by and see it done. When you and Baines have done with her she can come into the house and speak to me." So saying the Captain stalked off majestically and disappeared into the house.

Mr Hepburn was in nowise disconcerted. He glanced round him in search of some one who might act as his messenger, but Wright and Winburne, who had been anxious spectators of the scene through the cracks of the shed, kept carefully out of sight. After a moment's thought Mr Hepburn rang the bell and summoned Cobbe, whom he forthwith despatched to the constable's cottage, while he himself, closing the iron gate, stationed himself at it, so as to prevent the possibility of the prisoner's escape.

A very interesting tableau was now presented. On one side was the usher, standing upright and stiff at the entrance, inflexible to all appearance as Rhadamanthus himself; on the other side were Winburne and Wright, watching with looks of perplexity and alarm the issue of this strange adventure. In the middle was Temple himself, for once in a way, fairly at his wits' end. It was plain he had not been recognised. He

"A VERY INTERESTING TABLEAU."

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had, indeed, been so afraid of Tom Cobbe's scrutiny that he had slouched the bonnet over the upper part of his face, and tied a handkerchief round his neck, which concealed his chin. But it was wholly impossible that he could stand a long examination by the constable, even if he had known what to say. He was considering, whether it would not be his best chance to make a sudden rush, scramble up the roof of the shed, and escape, if possible, over the wall and so through the back gate. He could certainly climb the roof in question if it were not for his gipsy habiliments; and it would be impossible for Hepburn, who was as stiff in his movements as a poker, to follow him. But he was more than half afraid, that hampered as he was, by his attire, he would be unable to make the ascent, in which case, of course, it would be all over with him. The time, however, was passing on, he must do something. He was on the point of making a desperate rush, when suddenly a tremendous uproar arose in the back-yard. Neptune was heard barking furiously, and anon there came screams and cries for help, as from some one in mortal danger. At the same time Winburne rushed out, exclaiming that the dog must have seized some one and was tearing him to pieces. "Help, help," he exclaimed, "he'll be murdered."

"Ah! some accomplice," exclaimed Mr Hepburn. "Some one hanging about to rob the premises, while this girl engaged the attention of the occupants. The dog must be called off though. He mustn't be allowed to kill the man." He hurried into the back court, where Nep's kennel stood, followed by Winburne, with frightened and anxious looks. But on their arrival they found the blood-hound the only occupant of the yard. He was evidently in a state of great excitement, strain-

ing and tearing at his chain; while the gravel was scattered about in all directions, showing the marks of a struggle. But the person, whoever he might have been, whom Nep had seized, had made his escape, probably over the wall of the yard. Mr Hepburn looked in all directions, but the fugitive was out of sight.

He turned somewhat relieved to Winburne. "Did you see the person, Winburne?" he asked. "What was he like? Was it a man or a woman?"

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure," said Winburne, still apparently a good deal dazed. "I only heard the dog barking. I was too frightened to look. I thought the man would certainly have been torn limb from limb!"

"No one would have been to blame but the person himself, if he had been," remarked Mr Hepburn, sententiously. "Still I am glad that such a casualty has been avoided. Let us go back into the play-ground. Baines must be here in a minute or two now, and we can set him on the track of this intruder. By the bye," he added in an altered tone, as though a thought had suddenly struck him, "I shouldn't wonder if—"

He hurried back into the play-ground, and glanced hastily round him. "What has become of the gipsy girl?" he cried.

"The girl who was waiting near the play-ground gate, a quarter of an hour ago, do you mean sir?" asked Winburne, innocently. "She was standing there when I came to call you, but she is gone now. I shouldn't be surprised if she had run away while you were in the back-yard!"

Mr Hepburn glanced hastily at the speaker's face, as though some suspicion had crossed his mind, but Winburne's features exhibited the utmost serenity.

"This is most singular as well as most unfortunate," he said; "I am afraid I shall have hardly any chance of lighting on the girl again. And here comes Baines, just too late. Baines, I am sorry to say the girl has escaped—escaped in the most extraordinary manner! While I was keeping watch over her here, some accomplice of hers, I suppose, endeavoured to get over the wall of the back-yard, and was seized by the dog. We went to rescue him, and while we were absent, the girl escaped."

"Seized by the dog, your Neptune—was he sir?" asked the constable; "then I judge he has some smartish marks upon him. He managed pretty well to get away from the blood-hound at all, but he won't forget him in a hurry, that's sartain! I'll send my men to look round 'em, and most likely they'll catch 'em both. The chap that has been bit won't travel very fast anyhow. Meanwhile, sir, if you'll be pleased to draw up a full description of this here girl—how she was dressed, and what she was to look at, and send it down to my house, that'll be a help to us in looking after her." So saying the constable took himself off to give instructions to his men.

"A description of the girl," said Mr Hepburn. "Well, as we all three saw her—Winburne, that is, Cobbe, and myself, I daresay we can do that. How would you describe her, Winburne?"

"Well, sir," replied Winburne, "I should say she appeared to me to be a common looking girl enough—short and stumpy, with carrotty hair, though I couldn't see that very clearly under her bonnet. She had an old gown on—I don't recollect the colour of that, but she had a brown shawl."

"Short and stumpy, red hair, a brown shawl!" exclaimed Mr Hepburn. "You couldn't have looked at her, Winburne. She was very thin and angular, if I remember right, and her hair was dark, unless I mistake; as for her shawl, it was discoloured, but it was certainly red."

"I daresay you are right, sir," said Winburne, demurely. "The truth is, I was so alarmed that I hardly noticed her."

"Well, that may have been," said the usher. "What do you say, Cobbe? Does your recollection support my view or Mr Winburne's?"

"I takes no account of that sort," replied Cobbe, loftily. "She was particklar saucy as they of her station is apt to be, and was dressed as the vulgar generally are."

"Can't you remember the colour of her eyes or hair, or of the clothes she had on?" asked the usher.

"They was very common eyes, and very common hair, and very common clothes, too," replied Tom. "I couldn't say no more about them."

Mr Hepburn gave a short grunt of dissatisfaction, and finding no more information was to be obtained, took himself off, followed by Tom. Presently Wright emerged from his corner, and the pair were shortly joined by Temple, who had resumed his proper attire, and carried the fishing basket and coat with the gipsy clothes wrapped in them, one under each arm. His first care was to replace the clothes in the bottom drawer of his bureau. Then the three confederates betook themselves to Temple's study, where they indulged in a hearty laugh.

"How did you contrive to make Nep bark in that way, George? I really was afraid for a moment that he had seized you."

"Nep will always bark savagely if you hold a piece of raw meat just out of the reach of his chain," replied Wright. "There happened by good luck to be some bits that had been fetched up from the butcher's for bait. I did the fellow that was being murdered pretty well, didn't I?"

"First-rate," assented Winburne. "You frightened old Hepburn out of his wits for a moment. Well, Charlie, you're well out of this. I must say you're a wonderful fellow for getting into scrapes, and a still more wonderful one for getting out of them again. I say, what fun it'll be when old Gurdon reads your letter and finds that the money has been returned!" How he'll crow over Hepburn. There'll be a worse row between them than there was this afternoon."

"Was there much of a row?" asked Temple.

"What! didn't you hear their voices as they came up the lane?" asked Wright. "I thought they would have come to fisticuffs. Now Gurdon will be quite cock-a-hoop. He'll be wanting to find you out, Charlie, in order to tip you five bob, as a reward for your honesty."

"Perhaps Charlie will indulge him," suggested Winburne. "He has only to put on his clothes, you know, again, and meet the Captain in one of his walks."

"He has had enough of that," said Wright, shaking his head. "There's a proverb about the pitcher going oft to the well. It was uncommon near being smashed to-day. Talking of that, Charlie, I wonder you brought those clothes back to-day. If I had been you, I should have taken them straight back to Mother Maggots and left them there."

"I did take them back," said Temple. "I took them back

as soon as I had changed my clothes. But I couldn't find Mother Maggots. The house was shut up."

"What! she has made a bolt of it?" asked Wright, "and taken your trousers with her, has she, Charlie?"

"I don't know what she has done with the trousers," answered Temple, "but she has gone herself. I knocked half-a-dozen times at her door, and then tried to make my way in at the back; but it was no go. I went and looked up one of the neighbours, and he told me that Baines and his lot had been up to the old lady's house, asking all sorts of questions. Hepburn, I suppose, had put them up to it. I guess she didn't much fancy having the constables hanging about the house, and so she had cleared off herself. I don't much expect to see her or my white trousers again. But as I told you before, they are no great loss. Mother Maggots is welcome to them."

## CHAPTER V.

### THE PISTOL MATCH.

SCHOOL was just up; the first-class boys were lounging about in the play-ground, waiting for the arrival of the post before proceeding to the beach. It was unusually late that day, and several of the boys were inclined to be discontented at the delay. Rawes and Dilke in particular grumbled at being obliged to kick their heels on one of the finest days they had had that season. It had been arranged that Graves and his party were to have the *Betsy Jane* that day. Burton and Cressingham had had it on the last half-holiday, and Temple and his friends had announced that they did not want it. It was a glorious day for a boating party; and it had been agreed that Graves, Taunton, Dilke, Rawes, and Payne should row to Crawley Point, and then sail back again. It would not take them more than an hour and a half, it was reckoned, and the sail back with the fine westerly breeze that was blowing would be delicious. Some of the party had tried to persuade Graves to set off without waiting for the post, but he was anxiously expecting to hear the result of his sister's application to his guardian for money to buy the gun and pistols, and had briefly stated his intention of staying for the letters. Jerry Taunton,

however, had been sent on to get everything in readiness, so that as little time as possible might be sacrificed.

"Some accident must have happened to the mail," said Payne, when a quarter of an hour or so had passed without the appearance of the school-servant. "The letters are sometimes late since this new postman's appointment, but I have never known him so late as this."

"He stops to gossip with everybody that he meets," grumbled Rawes. "Old Grimes told me he has seen him stand at a cottage door for a quarter of an hour together. A row ought to be made about it. We are just losing the fine part of the day. Jerry must have had the boat ready this quarter of an hour and more."

"Here he is coming back again," said Dilke. "He has come back to know what has become of us, I suppose. Well, Jerry, is the *Betsy* all right? This brute of a postman hasn't come yet. We can't go till he has come."

"It doesn't much matter whether he comes soon or late," returned Taunton. "I'm sorry to say we can't have the *Betsy*."

"Why not?" exclaimed half-a-dozen voices.

"She's gone out, and young James Gunn in her—that's why," returned Taunton.

"What an abominable shame," exclaimed Rawes. "It was a clear understanding that we were to have her on half-holidays. A row ought to be made about this."

"Well, old Gunn's very sorry," said Taunton. "I must say it isn't his fault, nor yet young James's either. There's an officer come down from London to make some inquiries at Curlew, and he insisted upon having the *Betsy Jane*. Gunn says he couldn't have refused him."

"An officer from London!" said Graves. "What! sent down by the Government, I suppose? No, old Gunn's right; he couldn't have refused that. What has he come down for? Did Gunn tell you that, Jerry?"

"He's going to inquire into that business about the gipsy girl, I fancy," said Payne, "which there has been all this blow-up about for the last three or four days. Hepburn has written up to London, I expect. Isn't that it, Jerry?"

"No, that's not it," said Taunton; "they wouldn't send an officer down from London about such rubbish as that. No, it's about two fellows that have escaped from Curlew—"

"Curlew!" exclaimed Cressingham, who with Burton and O'Toole had just entered the play-ground. "Convicts, I suppose?"

"No," answered Taunton, "they were not convicts. I fancied that when I first heard it; but they were man o' war's men. They had deserted from the *Enterprise*, which was lying in Curlew Roads just ready to join Lord Exmouth's squadron. The *Enterprise* was on the very point of sailing, in fact she has sailed now; sailed the day after these fellows got off."

"How could they have contrived to escape?" said Graves. "I should have thought it quite impossible. The whole coast opposite the island is guarded by sentinels to prevent the convicts from getting away, and they would have stopped any one who attempted to pass."

"They've made a swim for it and got to Haverport," suggested O'Toole.

"Haverport, Maurice," repeated Graves. "You don't know the coast, I fancy, or you wouldn't suppose that. The current runs so sharp to the east, that the strongest swimmer couldn't

make head against it. No, if they swam for it, it must have been the other way."

"What, our way?" said Dilke. "That might be, but then there is no landing place between us and Curlew. The cliffs are so steep the whole way along that a fellow couldn't climb them without help from above. There's no place at which they could land before Walescliff."

"And they couldn't have landed there, because the coast-guard fellows must have seen them," added Payne.

"No, it's a dead puzzle to every one," said Taunton, "how they did contrive to get off. This officer chap, whoever he is, has been examining a lot of fellows in Walescliff. That's what made him come here, instead of going to Horncombe by the mail. But he could find out nothing."

"Do you know why they deserted?" asked Burton.

"Simply because they didn't like to serve, I believe," said Taunton. "Old Gunn said they were pressed men, who had been brought on board only two days before, and next to nothing was known about them."

"Here are the letters at last," exclaimed Graves, as Tom Cobbe made his appearance with the bag in his hand. "Do you know what has made the post so late to-day?"

"The post is not in my department, Mr Graves," said Cobbe. "But there has been a good deal, I am informed, to occupy the postman this morning."

"That's to say he has been chattering and gossiping with everybody he met about these fellows who have made their escape, I suppose," suggested Dilke. "Well, Tom, who are the letters for? Is there one for Mr Graves?"

"There are but eight letters this morning, Mr Dilke. Two

of them for the Doctor, two for Mr Hepburn, one for Mr Burton, one for Mr Taunton, one for Mr Field, and one for Mr Graves."

"Why couldn't you give it him before, stupid!" cried Dilke, impetuously. "That's the letter we've been waiting for."

"Not to notice your language, Mr Dilke," returned Tom, with dignified serenity, "it is not my office to deliver the letters permiscusly, but according to fixed rules—the Doctor's first, as is befitting, the usher's next, and then the young gentlemen in the order of their alphabets."

"What, Taunton before Graves, hey, Tom?" asked Temple, laughing. "Is that the order of their alphabets?"

Somewhat discomposed, Tom muttered something about exceptions to all rules, and made a hasty retreat, while Graves, having glanced rapidly through his letter, tossed it aside.

"We needn't have waited for this," he said. "Clara only writes to say my guardian has been absent, but is returning immediately, and she will speak to him as soon as he arrives. Let us be off at once."

The others assenting, the whole throng moved off to the shore, leaving no one in the play-ground but Burton and Cressingham—the former occupied in the perusal of his letter, which seemed to interest him greatly, though it only contained a few lines.

Cressingham waited until he saw his friend fold the letter up and put it into his pocket, then he addressed him.

"What do you intend doing this afternoon, Clem?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't care much. Suppose we go down to the beach and join the other fellows."

"I've no objection. Perhaps we may pick up some infor-

mation about those two fellows we took off the Quoits. By the bye, isn't it rather strange we've heard nothing from George Alford about them?"

"The letter I got just now is from George," replied Burton. "But he says very little about the two men—only that they had brought the boating jackets and your handkerchief to him, and that he would forward them to us as soon as he had an opportunity. He only writes a sentence or two, because, as he says, he's going to send a long letter almost immediately. But come, let us be off."

They left the school precincts accordingly, and found, as they expected, their companions consulting as to how they should employ the afternoon. But Cressingham noticed that, with the exception of Temple himself, no one of the particular set to which he belonged, and of which he was accounted the leader, was present.

"Where are Wright and Winburne and Hibbert?" he asked of Field, who happened to be standing near him.

"Oh, they have gone off because they are savage with Graves," answered Field.

"What's the matter?" asked Cressingham.

"Didn't you see the row there was in the play-ground just after school?" asked Field.

"No, I was with Burton and O'Toole in the schoolroom finishing the Juvenal. What was it about, and with whom?"

"It was with young Hibbert and young Warner," replied Field. "They'd laid a wager about the time which it would take to run from the play-ground gate to the poplars. The distance, I should suppose, is somewhere about a hundred and

twenty yards. I've never measured it, but I should put it at that."

"You are not much out, I judge," said Cressingham, "go on."

"Young Hibbert declared he could run it in half a minute. Warner offered to bet him sixpence he couldn't. Some fellows were appointed umpires, and the start was just going to take place, when they found that none of them had a watch with a second hand. They went about asking fellows for one, and presently it was discovered that no one but Graves had the article in question."

"Graves never will lend his watch," said Cressingham. "Every one knows that."

"Charlie Hibbert didn't," rejoined Field, "or pretended he didn't. He went up to Graves, who was refastening the tassel of that whalebone of his, and asked him for it. Graves answered shortly that he wouldn't lend it. Charlie's back was put up, I suppose, at Graves's manner, or perhaps he thought that as the brother of a first-class boy, he might take liberties. He went back to Warner and the others and said loud enough for Graves to hear him: 'The sulky brute won't let us have it.'"

"The plague he did!" rejoined Cressingham. "And Graves was standing by, with his whalebone ready in his hand, was he? That was not wise of Charlie Hibbert, I must say!"

"True for you, my lad," cried O'Toole, who had been standing by, listening to the conversation. "I guess Charlie thought so himself a minute or two afterwards; for Stephen grabbed his collar with one hand and the whalebone with the other, and laid into him for the dear life, till he howled again!"

"He might have expected it, I must say," observed Cressingham.

"He deserved a sharp cut or two, I allow," said Field, "but not such a savage leathering as Graves gave him. And he might have listened to Tom Hibbert, who ran up as soon as he heard of it and remonstrated, saying his brother would beg pardon. But Graves wouldn't listen, and it got so bad that Tom Hibbert and Winburne tried to catch hold of the whalebone."

"So they did," said O'Toole, "and they did catch it too, but not in the way they wanted. Sure and it was lucky for them that Wilkes came out into the play-ground, or they'd have been like the Kilkenny cats—nothing but their tails left!"

"I wonder Temple didn't interfere," observed Field.

"Temple was with the Doctor," said O'Toole. "I judge he doesn't know anything about it now, or he'd have gone off with Wright and Winburne."

"He couldn't have done anything but ask Graves to stop, or have referred the matter to the Doctor," said Cressingham. "I am afraid Temple and his set will be very sore about this though."

"Ye may say that," assented O'Toole. "Jack Winburne's shoulders and Tom Hibbert's fingers will be sore enough, ye may be sure. Jack won't lie on his back, and Tom wont write to his friends this week to come, I'll go bail for it! But won't we do something? Won't we play rounders, Burton?"

"Rounders," repeated Burton. "Well, there is a stretch of sand sufficient for that at this moment, no doubt. But the tide's coming in, and in three-quarters of an hour, or an hour

at farthest, we should be obliged to stop. Don't you think so, Temple?"

"There'd be time for a good game now," said Temple, "if we had the bats and balls down here. But that we haven't, and it would take twenty minutes to fetch them. But how about a paper chase along the shore?"

"I don't think there'd be time for that either," said Burton. "There's the same objection as there was to the game of rounders. We should be able to get round Cockle Head, and as far as Hanger's Cave, no doubt. But we shouldn't be able to get back again round the Head if we stayed any time."

"Well, let's do something at all events," said Taunton. "This is desperately dull work. Let's have a cock-shy. That is better than nothing." He picked up a ginger-beer bottle, which was lying among the shingle, the souvenir of some picnic held on the sands, and was proceeding to set it up on a flat rock at a little distance, when an addition to the party appeared in the person of Nep, who came bounding down the lane leading from Holmwood, followed by Tom Cobbe, who, like "panting" Time in Johnson's panegyric on Shakespeare, "toiled after him in vain." The dog, which had been tied up ever since the day of Burton and Cressingham's expedition to Deadman's Point, had been unchained, by Mrs Thornton's order, for a short run, and had made use of his liberty to follow the boys to the beach. He came bounding down in wild spirits, and sprang upon Graves, who was just stooping to pick up a stone. Graves's coat was covered with sand, and he, himself, was very near measuring his length on the ground. He got up in great wrath, and struck the dog a sharp cut with his whalebone. Nep, unused to this treat-

ment, growled fiercely, and showed a formidable range of teeth.

"Ye'd better mind what ye're at," exclaimed O'Toole. "If he catches a grip of ye, ye may send straight to the undertaker for your coffin. By the elevens, those teeth of his would grind ye up like coffee in a mill."

"The brute had better keep clear of *me*," returned Graves, who seemed no way daunted. "If he were to spring on me with his teeth, I should be the last fellow that he ever would spring on."

"You mean that the Doctor would interfere for the protection of his young gentlemen?" said Cobbe, who had now come up. "Well, no doubt we should all do our duty."

"I don't want any one to protect me," broke in Graves angrily. "I would put a stopper, and that pretty soon, on the brute, myself."

"Ye would?" cried O'Toole, "and how would ye manage that, my boy?"

"I should put a pistol bullet through his head," answered Graves.

"A pistol bullet," remonstrated the Irishman. "Sure and ye wouldn't hurt poor Nep, the darling! There he goes, as quiet as a lamb," he continued, as Cobbe, who had now succeeded in buckling the collar round his neck, led him off towards Holmwood. "There he goes for a fine fellow, as he is! Sorra a one would hurt him, to be sure!"

"I wouldn't hurt him unless he tried to hurt me," remarked Graves, with the same coolness as before; "but if he did, I'd show him small mercy. But come along, Maurice, Jerry;

come along, this cock-shy will be as good fun as anything else. We'll take a turn at it all round."

The boys readily assented, being in the idle humour, when anything diverts them. Half-a-dozen of the first-class entered for the contest. Each picked up his pebbles, and took his shot in turn. But the bottle was a small one and was placed at a considerable distance, and it was agreed at last that they must move nearer to it. Then Temple proved the victor, his second stone knocking a bit off the rim at the top, and his third shattering it to fragments.

"Well done, Charlie," said O'Toole; "You're the boy for my money. I'd like to see ye throw for hot potatoes at Ballinasloe Fair. Ye'd soon earn your supper."

"It's rather slow work shying pebbles," remarked Rawes, who was annoyed at Temple's success. "It would be some fun shooting at one of these bottles with pistols. You'd soon do for Temple at that, Stephen, I expect."

"How do ye know that?" asked Maurice. "Why wouldn't Charlie shoot with a pistol as well as he throws with a pebble?"

"Only that he can't," returned Rawes, carelessly. "Stephen is a first-rate shot, and Temple can't shoot at all."

"Can't I, indeed, Rawes?" asked Temple, sharply. "What do you know about my shooting?"

"I don't know anything," answered Rawes, "for the best of all reasons, because there's nothing to know."

"Did ye ever see him shoot with a pistol?" asked O'Toole.

"No," answered Rawes, "nor anybody else either."

"Ye're just out there, then, my boy," rejoined the Irishman; "for I've seen him shoot. It was one day last autumn, when we went over to see Mr Carrington at Horncombe. Mr Carring-

ton took us out with him, and Charlie shot first-rate. He shot a hare and two brace of partridges."

"What, with a pistol, Maurice?" asked Taunton. "Charlie must be a first-rate shot, indeed, to shoot partridges with pistols."

"Bother, now," said O'Toole, "it was with a gun, so it was; but where's the difference? Ye wouldn't tell me that he could shoot like that with a gun, and miss with a pistol. 'Omne majus continet in se minus,' as Hepburn's for ever saying."

There was a general laugh, which somewhat inflamed the Irishman's choler. "Ah! ye may laugh," he said; "but let them laugh that win. I'd back Charlie for a guinea—if I had one—against you, Dick Rawes, or any of your friends either."

"If you backed him against Graves, you'd lose your money, that would be all," retorted Rawes. "It's a pity you haven't a guinea, or I'd take the wager with you."

O'Toole, who was beginning to wax wroth, would have made an angry rejoinder, but Temple interposed. "You had better not back me against Graves, Maurice," he said, "for I have no doubt you would lose your money. At the same time, Rawes, let me tell you you're talking at random, rather. I don't know whether you or anyone else may have seen me shoot with a pistol, and I don't care either; but I have shot with one nevertheless. I don't profess to be a crack shot, but I'll undertake to hit a ginger-beer bottle, such as we were shying at, at the distance of a dozen yards, certainly once in six times."

"Once in six times," repeated Rawes contemptuously; "first-rate shooting that, to be sure. Why, here's Stephen, who'd be safe to hit it five times in six, and probably the sixth time also."

"I beg leave to say I doubt that," said Temple.

"Very likely; but your doubts don't go for much. What do you say yourself, Steve?" he continued, turning to Graves, who had stood by amusing himself by drawing figures on the sand with his whalebone. "Couldn't you have hit the ginger-beer bottle that we smashed just now. Couldn't you have hit it at twelve yards with a pistol."

"Well, yes," answered Graves, indifferently. "A fellow could hardly miss it at that distance, I should think."

"Ye couldn't," cried O'Toole. "I'd just like to see ye do it, my boy. Can't we get a pistol now from anywhere, and see him do it?"

"Oh yes," said Taunton. "We could get a pistol if we wanted one. Old Grimes has a pair hanging over his mantel-piece. I make no doubt he'd lend them."

"Hooroo! that's the time of day," shouted Maurice. "We'll be off and borrow them. It isn't above a mile, the short way to Grimes's. We'll be back in a quarter of an hour. Jerry, my lad, ye'll come with me, won't ye? 'Tis you that are the boy to blarney Grimes, and no one else."

"I've no objection," said Taunton, laughing. "He's a good-natured old chap is Grimes. I don't know that it would require much blarney to persuade him to lend the pistols."

The two boys were on the point of setting out when Burton interposed. "You don't really mean to shoot this match, do you?" he asked, looking at Graves and Temple. Neither of the boys addressed made any answer, but O'Toole broke in.

"Why wouldn't they shoot it?" he asked.

"Why?" repeated Burton. "Because it's dead in the teeth of the rules of the school. It is most strictly forbidden to use

guns or pistols. There was a great row three or four years ago, soon after I came, when some fellows merely went to a shooting-match, but didn't take any part in it themselves."

"Ye are not asked to shoot," said O'Toole, "and ye needn't stop and see it if ye don't like it."

"I know that, Maurice," said Burton. "But it's the business of the seniors to prevent the rules being broken."

"The seniors," repeated O'Toole. "Be easy, now. If you and Fred Cressingham, there, are seniors, so are Charlie and Steve, too. Ye can't come the senior over them."

"I know that, O'Toole," said Burton. "I have no wish to meddle with them. But they didn't propose this, and I don't suppose they will agree to have anything to do with it."

The remark was not judicious. Temple coloured slightly, but said nothing. Graves observed coldly: "You need not trouble yourself about me, Burton. I don't particularly care about this match; but unless Temple declines it, I shall be ready to shoot it."

"I don't know why I should decline it, I'm sure," said Temple. "If you choose to bring the pistols here, I, too, am ready to make the trial."

"That's all right, then," said Taunton, who, like many of the others present, wanted to see the match shot—in the first place, for the fun of the thing, and in the second, in order to thwart Burton and Cressingham, with whom he had the same kind of smouldering feud which a scampish boy usually has with an orderly one. "Come along, Maurice. If you fellows will find a bottle—there's a lot scattered about on the shore here,—and mark out the distance, we shall be back almost as soon as you are ready for us."

"We had better come away, Clem," said Cressingham. "We can't prevent this, of course, but we will take no part in it. Let's walk up to Spurling Farm. I want to see whether they've begun the harvest in Dobson's wheat-field."

The two seniors moved off, and the others spread themselves over the beach in search of ginger-beer bottles. Half-a-dozen were soon found. One of them was chosen, and firmly fixed on a flat shelf of rock. Presently Taunton and O'Toole returned with a pistol-case and a bag of bullets.

"Now then, Temple," said Graves, when Rawes had loaded one of the pistols and handed it to him, "do you wish to shoot first, or leave that to me?"

"You had better take your shots first," answered Temple. "You are to hit it five times out of six, you know. When that has been done I will take my six shots, and see whether I can hit it once or twice, as I engaged to do. Only," he added, looking round him, "I doubt whether there'll be bottles enough."

"There's plenty more," said Dilke, "if we should want them. But here are the six that Steve will smash, and they may be enough after all." Temple coloured, as he was apt to do, when he felt annoyed, but he made no reply. Graves took the pistol from Rawes, stepped up to the line that had been marked on the sand, levelled, and drew the trigger. The ball missed the mark, but where it went no one could see. There was an exclamation of surprise, for everyone had expected to see the neck of the bottle fly off.

Graves himself looked annoyed. "Load the other pistol, Dick," he said, "but don't put in quite so much powder. I pointed straight enough. I suppose the pistol must have thrown up a little."

Rawes obeyed in silence, and handed him the second pistol. Graves now aimed with greater care than before, but he had no better success. This time the ball struck a fragment from the rock at a place at least two feet wide of the mark.

Graves threw down the pistol with an angry exclamation. "These pistols can't be true," he cried. "I shan't shoot with them any more. You had better take them back to Grimes; they are no good at all."

"Stop a bit," interposed O'Toole, as Taunton was about to comply. "It's Charlie's turn now. Ye can but miss, Charlie," he added in an undertone to Temple, "and ye'll be no worse than him if ye do. I'll load for ye. The sight's true enough," he whispered. "Point straight, and it'll be all right."

Temple took the pistol, levelled carefully, and fired. A shout of acclamation was raised as the ginger-beer bottle flew into shivers.

"What an abominable piece of luck," exclaimed Rawes.

There was a general murmur of indignation.

"Luck, is it? Is it luck, ye call it?" cried O'Toole. "Will Graves himself says that it's luck?"

"No," answered Graves quietly. "It was not luck, Maurice. But I'll tell you what it was. It was that you found out what Dick Rawes didn't—that the bullets didn't fit the pistols. I suspected that after the second shot, and so did you, for I saw you wrap the bullet in a piece of paper before you rammed it down."

"In a bit of paper," repeated Maurice. "Murder! didn't Dick do the same? Sure it would have rattled in the barrel like a pea in a pea-shooter! You'd better load yourself, Stephen, and we'll put up another bottle for you—though, to be sure, ye won't mend Charlie's shot."

"No," said Graves, "I don't mean to shoot with these pistols any more. I think I was foolish in undertaking to shoot a match with pistols, of which I didn't know anything. But I tell you what: I'll undertake to shoot this match as we originally agreed—hitting a bottle at this distance—that is to say, five times in six. If I don't do that, and Temple hits it twice in his six shots, he wins. If I do hit it the five times, and he makes more than four misses, he loses. Both parties to provide their own pistols. Do you agree to that, Temple?"

"I don't want to have anything more to do with it," said Temple. "I didn't wish it at first, but you fellows wanted it."

"We fellows want it now," said Rawes, "and it will be most unfair—"

"I'm not going to do anything unfair," interrupted Temple. "I'll shoot the match, only it must be shot some day this week or next. I expect I shall be sent for home in the week after next, and don't know what may be settled then about my return."

"Very well," said Graves. "This is Wednesday, August 9th; suppose we say Friday, the 18th."

"Better say Saturday," said Taunton. "Hepburn always goes over to his parish on Saturday, or is engaged in writing his sermon. He is the only one at all likely to catch us."

"Saturday be it," said Graves indifferently. "Indeed that will be better, as it will give one day more."

## CHAPTER VI.

### A RETROSPECT.

"WHAT a pity it is Charlie Temple lets those fellows lead him by the nose," said Cressingham, as the friends trudged along the lane towards Spurling Village. "He's worth them all three times over, and dislikes them, I believe, as much as you and I do, Clem. If he'd only had the pluck to say that he didn't care twopence what they said or thought, he wouldn't get into one scrape, where he gets into twenty."

"Yes," assented Burton; "but unluckily it's a part of Temple's character to mind what such fellows as Dilke and Rawes say. It has always been the same with him, as long as I can remember. He is for ever getting himself into a row, because he minds what fellows say, whose opinion isn't worth a straw. That was the history of the row he got into about Harry Wilder two years ago."

"Ay; I never understood the rights of that," said Cressingham. "Harry Wilder's a good fellow, isn't he?"

"I believe so," said Burton, "much such another fellow as Temple himself. It wasn't Harry that got him into the scrape, but a fellow who was staying at Colonel Wilder's—Drake, I think his name was. They used to play at billiards at the King's

Arms in the High Street during the holidays. He persuaded Charlie, after he'd gone back to school, to go up to the King's Arms and play with him and Harry, though the inn was out of bounds. Temple was very nearly caught one day by Wilkes and Macdonald, and he wouldn't go again. But Drake persuaded him to slip out at night, after the fellows were gone to bed—"

"How could Temple contrive to get out?" interrupted Cressingham. "Are you sure, Clem, of what you say? What passed was kept very quiet, you know."

"I know that," said Burton. "But Mr Knyvett, who was somehow concerned in the matter, told my aunt all about it; and she told me, wanting to warn me against Temple, I believe. I never talked about it, but I don't mind telling you. The thing went on for a long time, and at last Colonel Wilder found out that both Harry and Charlie owed Drake a lot of money. Drake had persuaded them to play for half-a-crown and five shillings a game, and in time it had run up to a good bit of money. Drake was going away, and wanted to be paid, and threatened to speak to Colonel Wilder about it—"

"He must have been a proper snob, that Drake," cried Cressingham.

"Yes," assented Burton, "an out and out snob. Well, Harry Wilder was obliged to tell his father about it, and to ask him not only to pay his debt to Drake, but lend Temple some money to pay his; for neither of them had a stiver. The Colonel was very angry. He went straight up into Drake's room, took out his purse, and paid him his whole demand against both Harry and Charlie. Then he requested to know when Mr Drake's portmanteau would be ready to be taken to the inn. Drake had to clear out at five minutes' notice."

"Serve him right, too," said Cressingham; "but the Colonel went up to the Doctor about it, didn't he?"

"Yes, the Colonel's a peppery old fellow," said Burton; and his back was particularly put up. I believe he was sorry afterwards that he had been so hasty. But he went and told it all to Thornton."

"Well, the doctor was pretty savage, I should think, wasn't he?" asked Cressingham.

"He isn't as fiery as the old Colonel, but he was very angry. He was for expelling Temple forthwith, but old Wilder, who had cooled down, begged him off. It was settled at last that Temple should give his word never to go out of bounds with Harry Wilder again; and that, I believe, has been strictly kept to. Temple had a black cross to his name, and that lost him the prize that half-year in the third class."

"I think he got off uncommonly easy," said Cressingham. "But look here, Clem. How did Temple manage to get in and out of the house at night? I don't know a place where it would be so difficult to do that. I know there's a moveable bar in the passage, and I've seen fellows scramble out of the window when they wanted to get into the yard after the house-door had been locked; and I know the inside wall may be scaled. But who could get into the yard from the *outside*, as Charlie must have done? Look what a height those walls are, and as smooth almost as a sheet of glass. It would puzzle a monkey to get up."

"I know all about that too," said Burton, "though I don't believe anybody else in the school but myself and Temple know."

"How did you find it out?" inquired Cressingham. "I suppose Mr Knyvett didn't tell you that too, did he?"

"No," returned Burton, "I don't suppose Mr Knyvett knew. No, I found it out in this way. I was very ill near about the time when this row was going on. I had sprained my foot very badly, and had to lie all day and night on my bed for nearly a fortnight. I was put to sleep in my present room, which is the only one in the house which looks to the north. I was lying awake about half-past three one morning looking out of the window at the birds, which were just waking up, when I saw Temple coming up through the wood on the north side of the house. He crept up very cautiously, looking round him in all directions. I had heard enough to guess where he had been, and was curious to see how he would contrive to climb the wall. I saw him disappear under the wall, and in a minute or two come out of the door of one of the old sheds, which are used as dust-holes and wood-houses. Then he got through the passage-window, as I had expected. I took the opportunity, when everybody was out of the way, of examining the shed, and, after hunting about for a long time, I found a sort of trap in one corner of a cupboard. It was so well concealed, and the place was so dark, that if I hadn't been sure that there must be such a thing somewhere about, I should never have discovered it. On the other side of the trap there was a narrow flight of stone steps that went quite through the wall and came out under an archway across the ditch, which looked like a drain. You might live fifty years in the house, and never find it out."

"Well, that was a rum go," said Cressingham. "Did you say anything about it to Temple?"

"No," answered Burton. "It was several days before I had an opportunity of examining the place, and the very day

afterwards the blow-up about Charlie took place. I heard he had promised not to go out again, and I thought it best to say nothing about it, or it might have got him into a fresh scrape."

"I think you were right, Clem. It would be better to keep it secret as long as Temple is here, at all events. By-the-bye, talking of secrets, I wish you would tell me all about George Alford. I was going to ask you about him on that day when we fell in with those two fellows on the Quoits. I used to like Alford very much, and should like to hear why he was taken away, and where he is, and what he is doing, if you don't mind telling me."

Burton answered that he had no objection to satisfy his friend's curiosity, and he proceeded at once to do so. We do not propose to repeat the conversation which ensued, but to put the information given into the form of a connected narrative, which will embrace Burton's early history, as well as Alford's.

Clement Burton was an orphan. He had only one near relative living, his father's unmarried sister. His father had offended his family by a marriage they disapproved, and he had been left to depend wholly on his pay for the support of his wife and child. In the sixth year of his residence in India he had been killed in a skirmish with some Sikhs, and his wife, who had been in very weak health for some years past, did not long survive the shock. Clement, the only child, was left without any provision, and was sent home to his aunt, his only relative. Miss Burton, who had succeeded to the property which should have been her brother's, received the little orphan, and undertook the care of him, though not very graciously. She was residing at this time in Wickfield, where she occupied a comfort-

able house. Clement was sent, when eight years old, to the only school which the little town contained, and there made acquaintance with George Alford, a boy about his own age. George was the son of Colonel Alford, an officer who had taken part in the ill-fated Walcheren expedition, and had a narrow escape from the Walcheren fever, to which so many of his companions in arms had fallen victims. The doctors shook their heads over him, and pronounced that he was not only unfit for active service, but doubted if he ever would be fit again. Wickfield was recommended as a suitable place of residence for him, the air being mild and soft, and he took up his abode there accordingly. He had not long been married to his second wife, one of the young ladies who had been sent out from England—as was the common practice in those days—to take the chances of the matrimonial market. He had needed a mother for George, and had been fain to take Miss Oldfield, not from any profound respect or admiration, but because she appeared the most eligible of those among whom his choice lay. So far as George was concerned, at all events, he had better have remained unmarried. She early took a dislike to the boy, whose warm recollections of his own mother offended her self-esteem, and whose high spirit set her at defiance. Colonel Alford saw that he had made a mistake, but, like a wise man, made the best of it, endeavouring to make up to his son, by his own personal affection, for his stepmother's coldness.

But the boy found his home an unhappy one, and was glad instead of sorry when the day came which transferred him to Mr Robson's school. Even if it had been otherwise, the friendship which he formed with young Burton would soon have reconciled him to his new situation.

As is commonly the case with strong friendships, the characters of the two boys were different. Clement was a quiet, and, though by no means wanting in ability, rather a plodding boy, single-hearted, and affectionate. George was clever, high-spirited to an extent that bordered on lawlessness, warm-hearted withal, and capable of strong attachment. He was frequently involved in small scrapes, and sometimes in more serious ones. In all these Clement did his best to extricate him, frequently to his own personal loss and discredit; for all which he was requited by increased devotion on his companion's part. The one point of resemblance between them, that both lacked the mother's love, for the loss of which nothing can atone to children, formed a bond between them, which would have been enough in itself to cement their friendship. The beginning of it might be said to date from an incident which occurred very shortly after their admission to Mr Robson's school. It was a wet afternoon, and Alford and Burton, who were both day-boys (as indeed were nearly all Mr Robson's scholars), and who chanced to live at a greater distance from the school than the other pupils, were ordered to stay behind after lessons until the rain had abated. Finding the atmosphere of the schoolroom of the dullest, young Burton took a ball from his pocket, and invited his companion to play at catch-ball with him. Alford complied, but after a quarter of an hour's play, George found the game dull, and began to vary it by throwing the ball at his companion. Clement warned him that he would do some mischief, but the other only replied by calling him a muff, and pelting him with the ball more vigorously than before. At last he noted through the window that the sky was again clear, and discharging one final shot at his

staid school-fellow, he opened the door and betook himself homewards. This parting discharge proved as fatal as the arrows of the Parthians are said to have been. It struck a bronze figure of Giles Chinnock, the founder of Wickfield Grammar School, which occupied the place of honour at the east end, and brought it down, bracket and all, with a crash, which it was wonderful that George did not hear as he raced along the school-yard.

It did reach, however, the ears of the schoolmaster, as he sat in his study, looking over the longs and shorts of the first-class boys. He forthwith hastened into the schoolroom, where he found Clement endeavouring to replace the bracket by the help of the school-poker, which he was using as a hammer. Mr Robson's anger was greatly roused. If there was one thing that he valued more than another, it was this bronze figure of old Chinnock, a venerable bishop, who had lived some five hundred years before, and whose connection with the school bestowed upon it the prestige of antiquity. He angrily inquired of Clement how this had happened, and was not mollified by being simply assured that it was an accident.

"An accident," he exclaimed, his eye lighting on the ball, which still lay on the floor. "You have been throwing that ball about the school, I suppose, and that has knocked it down."

He looked at Burton, and reading no denial in his face, and receiving none in words, went on—

"I shall take care that you are properly punished for this, Burton. You will write out for me ten pages of the Greek Grammar, and I shall send you home with a note to your aunt begging her to stop your pocket-money until the expense of replacing the bracket has been paid for. I am glad to see

that the figure is not broken, or it would be a much more serious matter."

Burton made no rejoinder, and was despatched homewards ten minutes afterwards with the threatened note. Clement wrote out the imposition, and delivered it to the head-master immediately after his arrival on the following morning. In the interim the carpenter had been sent for, who replaced Giles Chinnock in his former position, and nobody but Mr Robson and Clement himself knew anything of what had taken place.

But a day or two afterwards Alford reminded his friend of an engagement they had made to go out for a row on the Spene with one of the watermen, who kept a few pleasure-boats at the Bridge Wharf.

"I'm sorry to say I can't go, George," said Burton; "that is, unless you've got the money to pay for it."

"I got the money to pay for it!" exclaimed Alford. "Why, you know, Clem, that I'm never allowed any money now. Why, you know, Clem, when we talked of going out in the boat, I told you that I'd no money, and you said that your aunt always allowed you two shillings a week, and the boat wouldn't come to more than that."

"I know I did," returned Burton; "but I can't pay the money now."

"Oh! if you've changed your mind," said Alford in an offended tone, "that is a different matter. I'm sure I don't want you to pay anything you don't like for me."

So saying, and not waiting to hear the explanations that his companion was trying to offer, he hurried off in great dudgeon, and would hardly speak to Clement for the next few days.

But it chanced in the ensuing week that there came another wet half-holiday, and the usher suggested that Master Alford and Master Burton should again stay in the schoolroom until the weather cleared.

"Stay in the schoolroom," repeated Mr Robson. "Well then I must beg you, Mr Simcox, to stay there along with them, that is, if Burton is one of them. It was only last Wednesday that he was throwing a ball about, and knocked down the founder's bust. It was a wonder it was not broken. By the way, Burton, your aunt has sent me the money to pay the carpenter. It was six shillings. I hope she has stopped your allowance to make it good, as I requested her to do. Has she done so?"

"Yes, sir," answered Burton in a low voice.

"Knocked down the bronze figure, there!" exclaimed Alford, stepping forward. "Was it knocked over last Wednesday, sir, when Clement and I were left in the schoolroom after lessons?"

"When Burton was left there," replied Mr Robson. "I didn't know you had been there with him."

"Oh, if you please, sir, he didn't do it. I remember I threw the ball rather high as I ran away, and I did fancy I heard a noise of something falling. But I forgot all about it. Please to ask Clement, sir, if it isn't so."

"You hear what George Alford tells me," said Mr Robson, turning with some surprise to Burton. "Is he correct?"

"He did knock it down, sir," said Clement, "but it was a mere accident. He didn't see where he was throwing. And, if you please, sir, as the carpenter has been paid, and I did the imposition, I hope you won't punish George."

"Punish George," returned Mr Robson, laying his hand on Burton's head. "No, my boy, I will not punish him, if it is only for your sake. And I'll call on Miss Burton this afternoon, and tell her what has happened."

"Oh, Clement, how could you do it?" exclaimed Alford, as they passed through the streets of Wickfield on their way to their several homes. "And that's why you had no money, too, and wouldn't go out in the boat. I shall never forgive myself. Come in here, Clem," he continued, as they arrived at the gate of the Colonel's house. "Come in, I must tell my father about it."

Overcome by his companion's impetuosity, Burton allowed himself to be dragged into Colonel Alford's study, George pouring forth a narrative of what had taken place, and entreating his father to give him the money to replace that part of Clement's allowance which had been already stopped.

Colonel Alford looked at his son's open and animated face with glistening eyes. Then forcing a smile, he said, "You ought to repay Master Burton, of course, George. But why don't you do so out of your own pocket-money?"

"My pocket-money, father!" exclaimed the boy in surprise. "I never have any now. Mamma told me I wasn't to have any more."

The Colonel looked surprised, and was on the point, apparently, of making some angry remark. But he checked himself, and, after a moment or two of reflection, took out his purse and gave each of the boys a crown-piece. "Your mother misunderstood me, George," he said; "and as you have been kept so long without money, this to make up for it; and you, Burton, must accept this as a present from me. George, I

hope you will bring your friend home here on holidays, whenever he likes to come."

It was hard to say to which of the two lads this permission was the more acceptable. Clement's aunt, as we have seen, though not absolutely unkind, was cold and distant in her manner, and evidently regarded the nephew, whom an unlucky chance had forced upon her, as an encumbrance, of which she would willingly be rid. Her house was no home to him; but what was wanting there was found in Colonel Alford's family. The Colonel himself took a great fancy to the lad, showing him warm and unvarying kindness. Mrs Alford, though not so gracious, always welcomed him civilly. What her husband had said to her, no one but themselves knew, but it had the effect he desired. She thenceforth always treated her step-son with a show, at all events, of kindness. She was a clever woman, and, perceiving she had gone too far, used her best efforts to efface the unfavourable impression she had made, and, it may be added, succeeded in doing so, so far as her husband was concerned.

So matters went on for two years or so, until the boys had attained the age of twelve, when an accident occurred which might have proved dangerous. The Spene, it should be mentioned, was a broad river, and though deep for many miles near Wickfield, contained a number of islands, which were covered at high water, and sunken rocks which rendered it very dangerous. It was long before Colonel Alford would allow the boys to go out upon it, unless accompanied by a waterman, even in the heavy boats, which it was extremely difficult to overset. They did at last, however, obtain the desired permission, and eager to avail themselves of their newly-acquired privilege, set out the

very day after the leave had been granted for a long row upstream, though the day was ungenial and the sky threatened a storm. Having rowed a considerable distance, they found the day-light begin to fail. Aware now of their imprudence, they turned round and began rowing homewards. But a storm was evidently near at hand. The darkness gathered fast, and presently there came a deluge of rain, together with a succession of furious gusts, which nearly overturned the boat. The swell caught Clement's oar. He was knocked backwards, and the oar went overboard. The boat now became quite unmanageable, and was swept along by the wind and tide past the town, Alford shouting in vain for help. They were already abreast the last of the wharfs, and would soon have been carried out towards the sea, when Alford's cries were at last answered by a distant hail, and presently the welcome sound of oars was heard through the darkness, and a boat ran up alongside.

"Hallo, boys!" said the occupant of the boat, "how do you come to be out alone on a night like this? You shouldn't venture out in a boat, specially in this weather, if you can't manage her."

"One of the oars has gone overboard," said George, a little affronted at this address, "and my friend has hurt himself, or we could have managed her well enough."

"Well, you'd better let me come into your boat, which is a good bit bigger than mine," said the man. "We can row her in between us, and I'll fasten mine to yours."

They soon reached the shore, after which George inquired the boatman's name. He had no money with him then, he

said, but he should like to come down to-morrow, and pay him for his services.

But the boatman would not tell him. "I don't want no pay, sir, thank you," he said, "for saving your life, 'tis no no more than a man's duty, and I should be ashamed to take money for doing it."

George thanked him; and Clement by this time having recovered his senses, they wended their way home together. They made several attempts to discover their deliverer's name and residence, but for a long time without success.

At last it happened one bitter cold day in the January following that the two lads went out to skate on a piece of water, which had been formed by the overflowing of the river, beyond the town on the seaward side. It was a spot they had never visited before, and returning home after an afternoon's skating, they got entangled in a labyrinth of narrow lanes, some of which were flooded with half-frozen water. The night was dark, there being neither moon nor stars. At length they found themselves on the banks of the river near a pile of deserted, and apparently half-ruinous, buildings. Looking round them in all directions, they at last perceived a light at a short distance, and came upon a small cottage almost hidden by trees. They knocked at the door, but for some time received no answer. At last a feeble step was heard descending the staircase, and a sickly-looking woman with a rush-light in her hand opened the door.

"What do you want?" she said. "If it's money or victuals, we haven't none to give you."

"We have been out skating," said Alford, "and have lost our way. We want you to tell it us."

"Come in, sir," said the woman in an altered tone. "There's no one here can go with you, but I daresay John will be able to direct you, if you tell him where you live."

The two boys entered the house, glad to obtain a respite from the cold and darkness outside. On a low pallet-bed placed before the fire, an old man was lying, whom George at once recognised, notwithstanding his wan and wasted appearance, as the man who had rescued them on the night of their adventure on the Spene five months before.

"Why, you're the fellow," he exclaimed, "whom we've been on the look-out for ever so long. Don't you remember coming to help us one evening last August, when we were adrift in the *Nautilus*, and had lost an oar. Wherever have you been hiding that we couldn't find you?"

"I remember you quite well, sir," returned the man; "and 'taint no wonder as you couldn't find us. We've had nothing but sickness ever since. First of all, my wife here took the fever. She was down with it three months or more; leastways she couldn't leave her bed for three months good, and then I was took worse than she was, and I can't get about yet."

"Can't the doctor do you any good?" asked Clement.

"Doctor, young gentleman? We can't afford to pay no doctor; we can't provide ourselves with victuals and drink, let alone physic. The baker and grocer wont trust us no more."

"Why don't you ask for relief from the parish?" asked Clement, who had picked up some information about such matters.

"The parish? no sir. I'll never come upon the parish, as sure as my name's John Bowles. Ah, if my lads had stayed at home, as I wanted 'em to, we should never have come to this."

"Your two sons?" said Alford. "What has become of them?"

"They went to sea for seven year," replied the old man, with a sigh. "It were four year ago, four year come Lady Day. They may come back in three year, but they mayn't find their old father and mother alive if they do."

"What did they go to sea for?" asked Burton.

"Why, you see the times was hard. They used to work in the building yard close by, and got good wages. But when that was shut up, they was thrown out. I wanted them to stay and work with me as watermen. But they thought they'd do better for us all by going to sea. Half their wages was to have been sent to us, and so they were for two year and more. But now we're told they've gone into another ship, or something; anyway, the wages don't come. But you young gentlemen want to be told your way home, don't you? Tell me where you live, and I daresay I shall be able to direct you."

"I live at Pomona Villa," said Burton, "if you know where that is."

"And I at No. 4 East Street," said Alford.

"I know East Street," said Bowles. "It's about a mile from here. You must go straight on till you reach the corner of the Walescliff Road. Then turn to the right and go on for nearly half-a-mile, then you'll find yourself at the entrance of the High Street, and that—"

"When we get to the High Street, it'll be all right," said Alford. "Thank you, Mr Bowles, and here's half-a-crown that we always meant to give you for helping us that night. You must take it, please." He laid it down on the bed as he spoke. "Now, good-night. Clem and I will come and see you again before long."

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE LION.

THE two boys did not fail to plead on behalf of old Bowles with their friends, and their representations were attended with success. Colonel Alford knew something of the old man, who had done one or two odd jobs for him; and Miss Burton, whatever might be her faults, never refused to help any case of real distress. Broth, and wine, and proper medicines were sent down to the cottage, and the services of the doctor called in. The patient soon began to mend, and in two months' time was able to resume his usual employment. He was very grateful to his two friends, and during the ensuing summer, often took them out in his boat into the estuary of the Spene, where there was first-rate fishing. He would have refused all payment, if the boys would have permitted it; but they told him he must take the customary charge for the hire of his boat, or they would not go out with him. During these expeditions his ordinary talk was about his sons, of whom he had at last heard something. They had gone on board a whaling ship, and were to pass one or two winters in the Northern seas, after which they hoped to return with money enough to set them all up in business.

"They are good lads, young gentlemen," he would often say, "Tom and Bill, particlarly Tom. He never did any one no wrong, and was always kind to his father."

The boys would have thoroughly enjoyed their summer if it had not been for one drawback. This was the resolution which Miss Burton had formed forthwith of leaving Wickfield and residing for the future in the neighbouring town of Walescliffe. The cause of this determination was a quarrel between her and her next door neighbour, one Mr Wilcoxon, a widower, who had recently come to reside in Wickfield, and had rented the semi-detached villa immediately adjoining her own. Mr Wilcoxon was a middle-aged, rather handsome man, well-dressed, and with an address which passed with most people for good breeding. No one knew exactly who he was, or where he came from. There were of course all sorts of stories current respecting him. He was the son of an attorney in Sheffield, according to one report, and his father had made a fortune, of which Mr Wilcoxon was the sole inheritor. According to another, the parent in question had been a working-man, who had raised himself to affluence by some invention which he had patented, and had been careful to give his son a good education. A third rumour said that Mr Wilcoxon was not an Englishman by birth, but had come from the United States, thinking he could employ his money better in England. As usual there was some truth in every one of these reports, but more error. He was, in truth, the son of a country attorney, who had emigrated to the States, finding himself unable to make a living at home. He had settled in New York, where he had been fortunate in his speculations, and had bequeathed a considerable fortune to his only son, who

had thereupon returned to England, resolving to establish himself in business wherever he might find a suitable opening. Visiting Wickfield, he was struck with the commercial advantages of its situation, the cheapness of the living, and the low rate of wages paid to journeyman. He saw that if a factory should be built at Wickfield, its owner might supply the London market at a cheaper rate than any of the manufacturing towns. It would be the very place in which to employ his capital. He resolved to reside there for a short time at all events, and endeavour to arrange his schemes. In this purpose he engaged a house which, unluckily for Miss Burton, chanced to be No. 1 Pomona Villas.

Of all the ingenious contrivances for setting neighbours by the ears, none have ever been devised equal to semi-detatched villas. I suppose there have been found people so possessed with the spirit of peace and long-suffering, that they could live in two of these brick and mortar twins without either an open or a smouldering quarrel. Indeed, Miss Burton and her original neighbour, a blind and deaf paralytic old gentleman, did so live for a period of no less than six years; but mainly, it is to be feared, because the old gentleman in question was wholly unconscious of his neighbour's doings, or, indeed, that he had any neighbour at all. Miss Burton might batter away at her piano, as she was sometimes wont to do, through the whole forenoon, and provoke no message that her neighbour had a bad headache and could not bear any noise that morning. She might give a musical party, or even a dance, protracted to a late hour, and poor old Mr Wilkinson was in no way aware that any festivity was in progress. She might even keep Brahmapootras and Houdins in the garden behind the house

without eliciting remonstrance. But when Mr Wilkinson was carried to his rest in the churchyard, and Mr Wilcoxon took his place, a different state of things ensued. There was not much difference in the names, Miss Burton was wont to remark to her friends, but a great deal of difference in the men.

Mr Wilcoxon did not, indeed, at first interfere with her. It was his cue to make himself as acceptable as he could to his new fellow-townsmen; and Miss Burton was a personage of some importance in Wickfield. He endeavoured to make his way into her good graces, fastening upon Clement as the best mode of accomplishing his object. He had a son near about young Burton's age, whom he had sent to Mr Robson's school. One day Mr Wilcoxon planned an excursion to the Green Holm, an island lying, as the reader has heard, in the estuary of the Spene. It was to consist chiefly of young people, George Alford among others, who were to picnic on the island, and return to a dance at his house in the evening. He paid his respects to Miss Burton, inviting Clement to make one of the party. He had intended to add, if his overtures had been favourably received, that he hoped Miss Burton herself would do him the honour to look in during the evening. But the lady, who entertained a most aristocratic disdain of all persons who were not well known in the neighbourhood, and who further regarded it as a kind of impertinence that one of these should have presumed to take up his abode next door to herself, put on her very iciest manner, and declined in a very few words the invitation for her nephew.

Mr Wilcoxon "had the passions of his kind," and resented, after his own fashion, the affront he had received. Miss Burton presently received notice that "the neighbours" had complained

of the noise made by her fowls, which disturbed their sleep. Her favourite cat disappeared, and Martha, her henchwoman, was confident that it had been "shot by that there young Wilcoxon, with his nasty bows and arrows." To the same cause were referred the frequent breakages of the greenhouse windows. It was a long time before she could bring herself to address a note to her plebeian neighbour, and when at last she did so, she reaped but small advantage from the step. Mr Wilcoxon sent his compliments. He knew nothing of the matters to which Miss Burton referred, nor did any of his household. "Mr Wilcoxon could not but add, that the incessant playing on her piano, which was distinctly audible in his drawing-room, was a more serious annoyance than any which Miss B. complained of."

The good lady consulted her solicitor, Mr Knyvett, but received the unwelcome assurance that he was afraid she would find it very difficult to bring Mr Wilcoxon within the clutches of the law. He knew too well what he was about to get himself into trouble. The only thing Miss Burton could do, he feared, would be to change her house, and as her lease would be up at Lady Day, that could easily be managed. No doubt some other house could be found in Wickfield, which would suit as well.

Miss Burton agreed to the first half of his suggestion, but not to the other. She was willing to quit Pomona Villa, but she was resolved not to remain in Wickfield. The same town could not contain her and Mr Wilcoxon. Finding that her determination was fixed, Mr Knyvett suggested the neighbouring fishing town of Walescliff, as a desirable place of abode. There were several nice houses there, to his knowledge, now

standing vacant; there was also a first-rate school, Dr Thornton's of Holmwood Priory, to which Clement might be sent. Miss Burton approved of these suggestions, only stipulating that Clement should go as a boarder to Dr Thornton's school, as she wanted more quiet in the house.

The matter accordingly was so arranged, and with such expedition, that the Wickfield people heard of Miss Burton's approaching departure, almost before any of the particulars of her differences with Mr Wilcoxon had been noised abroad. Colonel Alford made an attempt to smooth matters between the disputants. He called upon Mr Wilcoxon, whose acquaintance he had already made at a public meeting, and represented to him that Miss Burton was an old resident, and a lady much respected in the town, to whom some consideration was due. Mr Wilcoxon received the Colonel with the greatest urbanity, declared that he had been much misunderstood, and was ready to do anything in reason for the sake of peace. With this assurance, the Colonel next visited Miss Burton, by whom he was welcomed with equal cordiality. The Colonel's mission was a failure, Miss Burton having already engaged the house at Walescliff; but it was not without its results nevertheless. Miss Burton expressed herself greatly obliged, and in reply to the Colonel's expression of regret that his son and young Clement would be parted, said she hoped the boys would meet frequently during the holidays. Mr Wilcoxon returned the Colonel's visit, and made so favourable an impression, that he thenceforth became a favourite guest at Mrs Alford's table, winning the Colonel's heart by his judicious praises of George.

Miss Burton's programme was carried out, with the consent

of all parties, half the boy's vacations being passed at Walescliff, and half at Wickfield; and it was hard to say which place the boys enjoyed most—Wickfield with its lovely river studded with green islets, or Walescliff with its rocky cliffs and picturesque harbour, and its deep-sea fishing and bathing. So happily passed two more years, but in the course of the second summer an occurrence took place, which put a stop to Clement's visits to Wickfield.

It chanced that the town was visited by a large travelling menagerie, and George and his friends, Clement Burton and Frank Knyvett, were among the earliest visitors. A large crowd had assembled, which increased as the evening advanced. The glare of the lights, and the noise of a hundred voices laughing, shouting, and cracking jests, excited some of the animals to an extent, which provoked still further the mirth of one part of the audience. One lion in particular, which (as they afterwards learned), had been only recently added to the menagerie, was in a state of furious excitement. It tramped up and down the narrow area of its den, lashing its sides with its tail, and showing its formidable range of teeth. Every now and then it made a spring at the bars; and if they had not been very securely fastened, they must have given way before it.

The boys, reckless as is ever their wont, were extremely amused at the lion's abortive efforts to seize his tormentors. On one of these occasions, his tail was thrust through the bars, and hung down for more than a foot outside the cage.

With all the heedlessness of a schoolboy of fourteen, George Alford caught hold of it with both hands, and tried to drag the lion backwards up to the bars. Frank Knyvett and one

or two more of his companions, who saw the manœuvre, also clutched hold of the tail, and their united strength was for the moment sufficient to pull the animal towards them. This roused the fury of the brute to the utmost. With a terrific roar, the like of which the spectators had never heard before, he wrenched his tail from their grasp, and turning round, he sprang with his full force at them. A crash was heard, as if the front of the cage was giving way. There was a scream of horror on the instant, and the crowd rushed pell mell through the open doorway, hustling and trampling on one another, nor once remitting their exertions, until they found themselves in the yard outside.

Clement, who had stood aloof, after vainly entreating George to desist from his dangerous sport, rushed up to his rescue, as soon as he perceived the peril in which his friend was placed. He was knocked down by the crowd, and fell, stunned and motionless, immediately under the bars of the lion's den. No one noticed this mishap until the doorway had been cleared of the mass of terrified fugitives, which had choked it. Then one of the hindermost venturing to look back, saw the boy lying in a swoon, almost immediately under the claws of the lion, which was still striving with unabated ferocity to break down the front of its cage. Clement's situation was evidently one of extreme danger. The oak rail into which the iron bars had been inserted still resisted, but the bars themselves had been bent in several places, and unless something was done to prevent it, the savage brute would soon force its way out. Frank Knyvett was too faint to understand what was passing; but George Alford, who had been carried out in the tide of the runaways, no sooner heard

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what was going on than he rushed back to the door, which some of the crowd were endeavouring to secure.

"Let me pass," he cried, "I must go and bring Clement out. Won't some of you fellows help me to carry him. He's in a faint?"

"You had better not attempt to go in there," observed one of those whom he addressed, "if you do, you'll only provoke him to break out all the sooner. The keepers are gone for their guns, and will be here presently. When they come, we'll go in and fetch the chap out. Better wait till then."

"Let me pass, will you?" returned George, indignantly; "if none of you have pluck enough to help in saving a fellow's life, let me go at all events."

He burst through the crowd and rushed in. They had been right in saying his entrance would provoke the lion to still greater fury, but George contrived to seize Burton by the legs and drag him out of the monster's reach. The brute renewed his efforts with increased fury, and would in a few seconds more have torn down the bars, which were already yielding. But at this moment three men armed with guns, entered the menagerie, and one of them, fearlessly stepping up to the cage, ordered the lion to retire into the inner den. The animal knew the harsh tones of the keeper's voice, and the instinct of habitual obedience prevailed over its rage. It crept slowly away until it had disappeared from sight. The inner cage was now secured, and the nearest blacksmith sent for to repair the damage.

Clement was soon restored to consciousness, and carried back, for he was still too exhausted to walk, to Colonel Alford's house. When he was informed of all that had passed, his

gratitude to the friend who had so manfully risked his life for him knew no bounds. George took it, after the fashion of boys, with great coolness.

"Come, Clem," he said, "you're making a deal too much of this matter. I don't suppose the brute would have broken out, even if the keepers hadn't come in, and any way I should have had you safe out of the way long before he could have got free. And, to be sure, you don't think I could have let you lie there and be chawed up by that beast, do you? It was my fault that he got savage at all, you know. Come, Clem, let us hear no more of this! Why, Frank would have done the same if he hadn't fainted."

"I don't want to say any more, George," returned Burton, "excepting only this, that I shall never forget what you did for me to-day. If ever you are in danger or trouble of any kind, you'll find that I have not forgotten it."

The affair excited a good deal of attention at the time, and presently reached Miss Burton's ears, who thereupon declared that she could not for the future allow Clement to run any more such risks. Master Alford might be a very clever and gentlemanly boy—she had nothing to say against it. But it was plain he was always dragging her nephew into mischief of some kind, and was a very undesirable companion for him. He had better pass his holidays for the future entirely at Wickfield, and Clement must stay at home with her.

So the boys were parted, to their mutual regret, but after all it proved to be only for a short time. Colonel Alford, whose health had gradually improved during his residence at Wickfield, at last found himself so completely restored, as to be fit for active service again, and the stirring tales arriving by every

mail from the Spanish Peninsula rekindled the martial ardour, which the melancholy experience of Walcheren had for the time extinguished.

He went up to London and submitted himself to medical examination, and this proving favourable, solicited permission at the War Office to rejoin his regiment. This was obtained without much difficulty, the regiment in question having suffered severely in the capture of Badajos. He was much aided in his arrangements by a relative of Mr Wilcoxon, who was one of the principal army agents in London. On his return to Wickfield to take leave of his wife and children, he warmly expressed his thanks to Mr Wilcoxon, who had now become an habitual visitor, and at Mrs Alford's request named him as one of his executors in the will which he executed before leaving England.

George saw his father depart with very mingled feelings. In many ways it was a severe blow to him, the first he had ever sustained, as he had lost his own mother when he was too young to understand his loss. His father had been his constant companion of his walks and rides, into whose ear he could pour all his school-boy confidences, assured of his ready and hearty sympathy. Now that Clement had been withdrawn from Mr Robson's, he felt that he should be left solitary indeed. On the other hand, George shared the keen interest that his father felt in the progress of the British arms in the Peninsula. He could not grudge his father the opportunity, which he knew he had long desired, of returning to active service in the field, and he looked forward with all a boy's enthusiasm to the time when he himself should join him there. His father had promised that as soon as he had completed his stay

at school, he would procure him a commission in his own regiment. And it appeared not unlikely that time would come before the close of the wars with Napoleon. His father's departure appeared to him the necessary preliminary to the accomplishment of his wishes. George asked also, too, and obtained a favour which went far to console him for his loss. This was, that he might be removed from Mr Robson's school and sent to Holmwood Priory instead. Colonel Alford perhaps was keen enough to see that although of late years Mrs Alford had treated George with all outward show of kindness, she had no real regard for him, as George certainly had but little for her. It would be quite as well that they should not be thrown so continually together, as must be the case, if George continued in Wickfield. It was some comfort to him to remember that Mr Wilcoxon, in whose hands he had placed much of his affairs, had always expressed the greatest partiality for George. Indeed, it had been a desire to show him civility which had caused the original quarrel with Miss Burton a year or two before.

The Colonel accordingly sailed for Lisbon, and on the day following George was sent to Holmwood Priory. Two other boys who play a leading part in this story arrived also on the same day —Stephen Graves and Charlie Temple. There was a curious contrast in the manner in which the three presented themselves at Holmwood. George arrived by the coach from Wickfield, having no one but himself to look after him. Mrs Alford had troubled herself no further about the matter than by sending the butler down to pay the boy's fare, and see his luggage duly put into the boot. Graves was attended by a servant in livery, and came in his guardian's carriage, his luggage having

been despatched on the previous day in a spring-cart. But Charlie Temple was conveyed to Holmwood by his mother and elder sister, who had travelled a considerable distance, and incurred a considerable expense, which they were ill able to afford, in order to make sure that he was comfortably housed.

They slept at the inn at Walescliff, and the next morning took their leave of him with many urgent entreaties that he would make the most of his opportunities.

"Your uncle has agreed to pay the expense of your schooling for the next four years, Charlie," she said, "and it was a great deal more than any of us expected. If you distinguish yourself at school, getting prizes, and a good report from your master, it is possible that he may do something more for you. It is not at all certain that he will, but there is a good chance of it. On the other hand it is *quite* certain that unless you do obtain these things, he will refuse to interest himself any further in you."

"My uncle's an old screw," said Charlie ungraciously. "There he is over at Bordeaux rolling up money, they say faster than he can spend it, and has neither wife nor child to give it to. Why should he grudge a little money to his eldest nephew?"

"Well, Charlie," said his mother smiling, "you know that you are at present no prime favourite of his. I am afraid he has not forgotten the tricks you played off upon him three years ago, when he was induced to come and stay a week with us. You know he went off on the third day, and has never been persuaded to come again."

"Well, mother, I only powdered his wig with Stilton cheese," said Charlie. "That wasn't anything so bad, surely."

"I don't know, Charlie. You had heard him say that he couldn't abide the smell of cheese, and had begged me to send it out of the room. You know how uncomfortable he was the whole evening."

"So he was," assented Temple, bursting into a joyous laugh at the recollection of the occurrence in question. "He couldn't make it out for a long time. He kept insisting on it that cheese had been brought into the room, and wouldn't take your assurances that it wasn't so. I meant to have got hold of his wig when he went up to bed and shaken the cheese-powder out of it. But that sulky French valet of his—Alphonse, or whatever they called him—he wouldn't keep the secret, but went and told his master, and then he wrote you a note, and went off before breakfast next morning. If ever I come across that beastly sneak of a Frenchman—"

"Hush, Charlie, no one was to blame but yourself. Alphonse is very much attached to his master. Frenchmen don't understand English schoolboys, Charlie. He thought of nothing but of the insult, as he considered it, which had been offered to his master."

"Well, never mind him," said Charlie, impatiently. "I don't suppose I shall come across him again, and I promise you, mother, I won't powder anybody's wig with cheese here."

"No," said Mrs Temple, again smiling. "I should think you had better not attempt anything like that; I expect Doctor Thornton or Mr Hepburn wouldn't content themselves with simply writing a note to me about it. But seriously, you must remember that your prospects for life are at stake, and work hard and be steady and well-behaved. There's another thing I have to speak to you about, too. Your father's old

friend, Colonel Wilder, is living here in Walescliff, and his son Harry, who is about your age, is living with him. The Colonel, I believe, educates Harry himself. Now, I have no doubt the Colonel will show you some kindness for your father's sake. He'll ask you up to his house on holidays, and if he likes you, may ask you to pass a week or so with him during the summer. I hear that his son is something like yourself, inclined to be mischievous. The Colonel, I know, is a very particular man. You must be careful not to get into scrapes with Harry Wilder."

"I'll be sure to behave myself, mother," said Charlie, demurely. "I rather like the look of this place, and you may go away quite happy without me."

Mrs Temple sighed, but she felt it was no use to say more, and with a parting embrace took leave of her son.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### GEORGE'S TROUBLES.

GEORGE ALFORD found his life at Holmwood in most respects a great improvement upon his former school experiences. The school was larger, the boys older and manlier than those to whom he had been used. The premises, too, were very superior to those at Wickfield. The schoolroom, which had once been, as some said, the refectory, and others the chapel of the Priory, was a lofty and spacious building. The rooms of the monks made small but exceedingly snug bedchambers. There was a famous cricket field, in which all manner of games were wont to be played. Above all there was the sea-shore, with its harbour completely land-locked, in which there was good bathing and rowing and sailing; as well as the deep sea itself, upon which they were occasionally allowed to go out under the care of experienced sailors. Clement was as acceptable a companion as ever. He introduced George to the friends he had made at Holmwood, chief among whom were Cressingham and Lander. Side by side these four boys shouldered their way up through the school during the first two years of their residence there, until they reached the second class. George continued to

receive continual reports from his father, always full of stirring interest. He had been slightly wounded at the great battle of Vittoria, and was now Lieutenant-Colonel of his regiment. He had been present at San Sebastian also, and expected to receive the rank of Brigadier-General in the course of a few weeks. These letters George used to read out to his three friends in a corner of the playing field (where they had constructed a kind of arbour) to the great delight of himself and his hearers. Sometimes the magnates of the school, even the four seniors themselves, whom the juniors regarded with the utmost awe and deference, would send for George, and ask him to read out these despatches, which he did with great pride and satisfaction.

The only drawback to his happiness was that he could not enjoy Clement's society during the holidays. Miss Burton persisted in her resolution not to permit Clement to visit Wickfield. Indeed, as a report had now reached her ears that the odious Mr Wilcoxon was in greater favour than ever in East Street, she would have nothing more to say to any of the Alford family. The two boys were obliged to console themselves as well as they could by retailing to one another, on the first day of the new half-year, all that had taken place during the holidays. There was generally a good batch of information to be imparted by both parties.

"It has been precious dull at Wickfield, Clem," said George on one of these occasions. "If it hadn't been for the Bowles's, I think I should have gone melancholy mad—the Bowles's and Frank Knyvett kept me alive."

"The Bowles's," repeated Clement. "Old Bowles and his

wife, I suppose, eh? The old lady usedn't to be such particularly good company either."

"Old mother Bowles!" exclaimed George. "No, I should think not. I wasn't speaking of her. I was speaking of Bowles's two sons. They have come home—don't you know?—came home three or four months ago."

"No, I didn't know it," said Burton. "Old Bowles is pleased at that, I should think."

"Pleased? Yes, I should think he just was," returned Alford. "He hadn't got over being jolly about it when I went home. They had brought back a pot of money, and had paid off the old man's debts and bought back the furniture he had pawned, and they were all living together as comfortable as any people I ever saw."

"Were the young fellows as jolly as their father?" asked Clement.

"Yes, regular chips of the old block," said George. "Tom Bowles is the best fellow I ever came across; and Bill, too, is a good sort of chap, though he's a bit cross-grained now and then. They used to take me about almost every day—sometimes to fish at the Weirs down-stream, sometimes right out to sea. We were out for hours together. Once we were out all night; at least we were out so late that I had to sleep at their house for the rest of the night."

"Out all night!" repeated Burton. "How did Mrs Alford like that?"

"She didn't like it at all," said George. "There's no great love lost between me and her, you know, Clem. Still, I shouldn't have minded so much if she'd rowed me herself, but she got that fellow Wilcoxon to do it, and I could not stand that."

"Wilcoxon!" exclaimed Clement. "What has he got to do with it?"

"He thinks he has something," said Alford. "He came round my father, somehow or other, before he went, and he left some of his affairs in his hands. I am sure my father didn't understand what kind of a fellow he really is, or he wouldn't have done that."

"What is he doing in Wickfield? There was some talk of his building a factory or something of that kind there, wasn't there?"

"Yes, he has bought up that old shipbuilding yard, close to which the Bowles's live, you know."

"I know it," said Burton; "that's where we lost our way that night."

"Just so. He bought the yard for an old song, and has turned it into a nail-factory. They say he's doing a roaring business."

"How does Bowles like him for a neighbour?"

"He doesn't like him at all," said George. "There's a very unpleasant stench from the works sometimes, when the water is a good deal fouled. Old Bowles threatened to go to law with him if he didn't stop the nuisance. His sons having come home with some money, would enable him to do so, you see. Wilcoxon was very much taken aback, and lost his temper, they said. He gave old Bowles so much offence, that when afterwards he wanted to buy up Bowles's property to enlarge his factory, the old man wouldn't let him have it at any price."

"I didn't know that Bowles's cottage was his own property."

"It isn't, but Bowles has a long lease of it, and that's what

he wont give up. Wilcoxon tried to come round him cunningly, but he failed."

"What did he do?" asked Clement.

"He went to old Bagster, the landlord, and offered him a large sum for the place, if he could get the Bowles's out. Bagster said he should be glad to accommodate Wilcoxon, but he didn't see how he could get the Bowles's out, if they wouldn't go. Wilcoxon, they say, asked him to let him see a copy of Bowles's lease, and there he found that the tenant was obliged to keep the premises in a complete state of repair. 'You can get rid of him easily enough,' Wilcoxon said, when he had read it. 'Bowles's house is in a very bad state, it would cost more money than he has got to set it right. You have nothing to do but to serve him with a notice to execute the repairs required under the lease.' He didn't know at that time, you see, about the young Bowles's having brought home money. To his surprise the old man answered Bagster that he was just on the point of ordering the repairs to be done, so Wilcoxon took nothing by his motion."

"He was utterly floored in fact," suggested Burton.

"Well, not quite," returned the other. "There was a clause in Bowles's lease, which enabled the landlord to raise the rent if the property was improved. He gave old Bagster his price for it, and then proceeded to make what he called some improvements, built a wall all round, and a lot of outhouses, and then insisted on Bowles paying a heavy rent for these. The old chap went to Frank Knyvett's father and told his story, and Knyvett said that if Bowles hadn't asked that these improvements should be made, and Mr Wilcoxon couldn't show that they were absolutely necessary, the tenant

couldn't be charged with them. So old Ironhead, as we call him, was sold again."

"And I suppose he's pretty savage," suggested Clements.

"He may be inwardly," said Alford. "But he's too clever a fellow ever to show that he's put out. He's as smooth as oil always. But Bowles doesn't trust him. He says he's sure he's up to some further dodge now, though for his part he doesn't care what Mr Wilcoxon may do."

"I wonder how Mrs Alford can like him," observed Burton. "I should have thought everyone would have hated a sneak like that."

"Well, she does like him, that's certain," said George; "she consults him on all occasions. She can't engage a new servant, or alter one of the flower-beds in the garden, without taking his advice."

"Is he civil to you, George?" asked his schoolfellow.

"A deal too civil," said Alford. "Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth when he speaks to me. It is all about the regard he has for my mother, and the promise he had made to my father, and the special interest he takes in myself, and all that sort of thing. He doesn't get much change out of me. I think he's beginning to find out that I'm not to be bamboozled."

"What was the last news from your father?"

"Oh, all right. My father has got his rank as Major-General, and will be coming home before long. Three regiments were sent from Paris to Ireland, but they are not to stay there any length of time. At all events he'll come home on leave in the spring, he says. I hope he'll make arrangements about getting my commission as soon as he comes home."

"Well, George, it will be great fun seeing you in your new uniform," said Clement, smiling at his friend's eagerness, "but I am afraid you wont get any fighting. Boney is shut up in the Isle of Elba, and wont fight any more."

"Oh, there will be sure to be fighting somewhere," said George. "They have got too well used to it on the Continent to give it up just yet. Heigho! I wish the spring would come. I am getting tired of grinding at Latin and Greek and the Rule of Three."

The spring did come; but it did not bring General Alford, as George had hoped. He had obtained the leave for which he had applied, when suddenly came the news of Napoleon's escape from Elba, and the armies of Europe were again called into the field. All the regiments under General Alford's command were despatched in hot haste to Belgium, and the General of course went with them. The most intense anxiety was felt all over England. Nothing else was talked of in any society except the approaching struggle. Napoleon had been acknowledged as Emperor by the French people, had collected an army—not so numerous, it is true, as those with which he had so often overwhelmed the great continental Powers, but formidable nevertheless, because containing so large a proportion of veteran troops. The Prussians who were opposed to him were not thought equal to coping with him. Then there was the Great Duke, who had never yet been defeated, but who also had never yet measured swords with the Great Soldier of the nineteenth century. The duel between these two renowned champions was awaited with an intensity of interest which only those who lived at that time could understand.

It will readily be believed that George Alford's whole

thoughts were engrossed by it, and the joys of the cricket-field were but tame in comparison. The General wrote frequently to his son, knowing how anxious he would be to hear from him. George heard of his arrival in Brussels, of the gallant struggle at Quatre Bras, and of the advance to Waterloo. The General's letter, dated the 17th of June, informed his son that the Duke had taken up his position on the heights of Mont Saint Jean, and that a pitched battle was imminent on the following day. The excitement of the next four-and-twenty hours was too great for description. George's thoughts were so completely occupied by it, that he could turn them to nothing else, and the masters, compassionating his anxiety, passed over his shortcomings without notice. Towards evening a report was current in Walescliff, brought down it was said by the mail from London, that a terrible battle had been fought, and a great victory won by the English. But it appeared to be nothing more than a mere rumour; and in those days so many rumours were rife, which afterwards proved to be wholly unfounded, that people were only half inclined to believe it.

On the following morning a visitor arrived for George, in the person of Mr Wilcoxon. He had come to break the disastrous intelligence of the terrible slaughter of the 18th, which, it has been truly said, threw half England into mourning. General Taylor had despatched a letter from the field to Mrs Alford, informing her that her husband had been killed by one of the last guns which the enemy had discharged, at the very end of the battle, just as the charge of the Guards had begun, which threw the enemy into irrecoverable disorder. His death had been instantaneous, but he had before the battle

informed General Taylor that he had made his will and all other necessary arrangements, and requested his friend, in the event of his death, to write to Mrs Alford. Mr Wilcoxon went on to say that his mother wished him to return immediately to Wickfield.

The poor lad was utterly crushed by the blow. Youth is ever sanguine, and the possibility of such a termination to his father's career had never entered his thoughts. He made no objection to his step-mother's proposal. The meeting between himself and Mrs Alford was a cordial one; for though she had not regarded her husband with the intensity of affection felt by George, she had nevertheless been sincerely attached to him. During the summer holidays all went quietly enough, nor was there any serious outbreak in those which followed in December and January, though something of the old feeling had before the end of the winter vacation begun to show itself. Mr Wilcoxon was now frequently in East Street; George declared that he was always there, and his dislike to that gentleman was by no means diminished by the fact, that the latter had now in a great measure laid aside the semblance of cordiality he had hitherto affected, and adopted a tone which gave the lad still deeper offence. He now avoided Mr Wilcoxon as much as possible, passing all his time with the Bowles's, notwithstanding the open quarrel between them and Mr Wilcoxon. Cold as the weather was, he went out fishing and rowing with them every day, Frank Knyvett occasionally joining the party. George left East Street immediately after breakfast, only returning in time for the late dinner. He received one or two hints, in the course of the winter, that this constant companionship with Bowles was not

agreeable to Mrs Alford. The man had behaved with great insolence to her valued friend, Mr Wilcoxon. It did not become any one nearly connected with her to uphold him.

George paid no heed to these hints; and when he came in June for his summer holidays, Mrs Alford was obliged to speak explicitly on the subject.

The lad answered, that if he was obliged to give up the Bowles's, his life would be too dull for endurance. Except Frank Knyvett, he had no one but them.

"I am sorry," she replied tartly, "that my house is so disagreeable to you, but I do not know how it is to be helped. The holidays at Holmwood, as you know, have only just begun, and they will last for fully six weeks. You can't go back to Walescliff till then, even if it should be thought desirable that you should return to Dr Thornton's at all."

"Return there!" repeated George. "I don't want to return there. I don't think my father would have sent me there last half. I am past seventeen, and he always intended to apply for my commission, as soon as my seventeenth birthday came. I don't see why it should not be applied for at once. General Taylor, you know, said in his letter, that it would be a great satisfaction to him to do anything that would show his respect for my father's memory. He could get me a pair of colours, merely for the asking."

"Go into the army!" exclaimed Mrs Alford, apparently much surprised. "Do you imagine your father intended that George?"

"Intended it!" repeated George, impetuously. "Why you know, quite well, he intended it—always intended it! He

has spoken to me about it a hundred times. He never intended anything else."

"He never expressed any such intention to me," said Mrs Alford. "I think you must be mistaken. However, I will speak to Mr Wilcoxon on the subject. You know, of course, that my income is greatly reduced by your father's death."

"The cost of the commission, even if it should have to be paid for," said George, "will come out of my money, and not yours."

"*Your* money," repeated Mrs Alford, "the money which will be yours, you mean, if you should live to come of age. But that will not be for several years yet to come; and, meanwhile, the disposal of it does not rest with you. However, as I said before, I will consult Mr Wilcoxon on the subject."

"Why is he to be consulted?" cried George. "What have I to do with him or he with me, that he is always to be meddling in my affairs?"

"His right to meddle is, that he is the executor of your father's will, and will be jointly with me, your guardian."

"I did not know that," exclaimed George, in a tone of mingled surprise and dismay. "I don't think that can be so. I never heard a hint of that before."

"I don't suppose your father thought it necessary to consult you on the subject," said Mrs Alford. "But if you like to go up to Mr Knyvett, your friend Frank's father, you may see a copy of your father's will, and satisfy yourself on the subject."

George put on his hat, and went straight up to the attorney's office. Mr Knyvett, whose name has been several times mentioned, was a worthy man, the solicitor with the largest practice in the neighbourhood. He was Miss Burton's man of

business, the reader will remember, as well as General Alford's, and he had always been friendly with George. He received him now with great kindness, but in reply to his anxious questions, was obliged to inform him that his step-mother had stated the facts correctly.

"Your father left in rather a hurry, George," he said, "and had no time to write to friends who lived at a distance, or he might have chosen some one else. Mr Wilcoxon, too, had done him some considerable service, and Mrs Alford was particularly anxious that he should be executor."

Mr Knyvett glanced furtively at George's face as he said this, and saw an expression of dissatisfaction overspread it as he heard the words.

"I can't think what she can see in that Wilcoxon," he broke out, hotly, "that she is always having him up at East Street. I hate him, and he hates me, though he pretends he doesn't."

Mr Knyvett stepped to the door, and carefully closed it. "That's unlucky, my lad," said he. "Look here, George, I am not in the habit of telling secrets—particularly not to boys of your age. But I think you ought to know what I know—what everyone will know, in fact, before long. Can you guess it, George?"

"I suppose she is going to marry him," said George. "I have thought it might not be for a long time, only that I can't conceive it possible that she could do it. And then, I suppose, he'll call himself my father, and order me about as he pleases. I'll never call him so, at all events. And he may order me, but I don't think he'll catch me obeying him."

"That is just what I want to speak to you about, George. I have your father's will here. I didn't draw it, and it was

sent to me sealed up, only to be opened after his death. But I see the most complete powers are given under it to the executors to invest your property, until you come of age, in any way they think proper. Now, I daresay you have your own views as to what profession you would like to follow—"

"My father always meant me to be in the army," interposed George. "Everyone knew that; my step-mother knew it perfectly, I am sure, though she says she didn't."

"She says she didn't, eh? Then depend upon it Mr Wilcoxon says so too."

"Isn't there anything about it in the will, sir?" said George, anxiously, "or in any of his papers? He mentioned the subject to me over and over again in his letters, but, unluckily, I never kept them."

"Unluckily, indeed," repeated Mr Knyvett. "I won't deceive you, George. There is very little chance of Mr Wilcoxon's allowing you to go into the army, if it depends upon him. He is a member of the Peace Society, and professes to think all war wicked, and Mrs Alford will do whatever he recommends. You asked just now whether there might not be something on this subject in General Alford's papers. That is certainly possible. But I have never seen his papers; they have always been in Mrs Alford's keeping."

"And she wouldn't bring them out, unless it suited her purpose to do so," said George, bitterly. "Well, go on, sir, you have something more to tell me."

"Yes, one or two things. I have reason to know, and you ought to know it too, that Mr Wilcoxon contemplates investing your money in a different manner. He wants to put it into the business in which he himself is engaged."

"What, the nail factory?" exclaimed George. "That place that he has built down by old Bowles's cottage? You don't mean he wants to put my money into that?"

"He does though," said Mr Knyvett. "He says that it is not only the best possible mode of employing your money, but the best opening in life for yourself also. He means to appoint you to a clerkship in the factory, and in time, if you give satisfaction, to a junior partnership."

"I won't do it," shouted George, passionately. "I'll run away, and enlist as a common soldier first! Can't he be prevented in any way from doing it, sir?"

"Hem," said Mr Knyvett, "not by your running away and enlisting, George, certainly. Well, Mr Wilcoxon is not the sole executor; there are two."

"Ah, but I suppose my step-mother is the other," suggested George, despondently.

"No," returned Mr Knyvett. "The other executor is a gentleman with whom I am not acquainted, though possibly you may be. It is a certain Major Baynton. Do you know him?"

"Know him," cried George, joyfully. "I should think I did. He is the best fellow that ever lived. My father and I went to stay with him nearly all the summer holidays two years ago. It will be all right now. He knows my father's wishes about my going into the army as well as I do myself. He won't let old Wilcoxon bully me. Hooray, hooray! I'll write a letter to him immediately, or perhaps you wouldn't mind doing so, sir?"

"Stop a minute, George; you're getting on too fast. Major Baynton is named executor, but no one knows where Major

Baynton is. He sailed with his regiment for the United States of America, when the war broke out between us and them, and was present at the battle of New Orleans, where we got so sharply handled by the Yankees. He has never been heard of since that day. His name was not in the *Gazette* among the killed or wounded, but he was reported as missing. I have never had any reply to the letter which I addressed to New Orleans on the chance of finding him, immediately after your father's death. He may have been severely wounded, and be still lying in one of the hospitals in New Orleans. But I fear the chances are that he is dead."

"Hasn't he any friends in England, sir, who would know about him?"

"None, so far as I can ascertain," replied the lawyer. "Well now, George, I have told you this in order that you may understand exactly what your position is. If Major Baynton is really dead, you are wholly in Mr Wilcoxon's power—"

"That I never will be," broke in the lad impetuously.

"Be quiet. Mr Wilcoxon professes to feel quite certain that he is now the sole executor. I will do all I can to find out whether the Major is still living. Meanwhile, I earnestly advise you to do nothing to provoke your step-mother. Of course you will say nothing to any one of your interview with me."

George promised, and withdrew. He obeyed Mr Knyvett's instructions so far, that he did not reveal what had passed to any one, except his friend Clement, from whom he could keep nothing secret. But he was unwise enough to attempt a remonstrance with his step-mother, in the course of which he spoke in such terms of Mr Wilcoxon as roused that lady to a

pitch of anger which she rarely displayed. She told him that her house would no longer be open to him, unless he treated his future father with the respect due to him. As for the employment of George's money in the manner contemplated by Mr Wilcoxon, George ought to be grateful to him for the kind consideration shown him, notwithstanding his insolence and ingratitude. If he did not choose to take the clerkship so kindly offered to him, he might go without it. Neither she nor her future husband would in that case trouble themselves any further about him. For her part she had already put up with more from him than from any other person in the world, and she was resolved to endure no more.

They parted in mutual anger, and the same evening Mrs Alford communicated to her fiancé the particulars of her interview with her step-son. Mr Wilcoxon took advantage of it to hasten the nuptials, which were, as a mark of respect to General Alford's memory, to have been deferred for two months more.

"I am the executor of General Alford's will," he said, "but you are named in it as the boy's guardian. I cannot act in your name very well until I am your husband. The sooner this troublesome boy is put down the better. We mean our marriage to be quite private, you know. Why shouldn't the wedding take place at once?"

Mrs Alford allowed herself to be persuaded, and in a week from that time the ceremony was performed. It was as Mr Wilcoxon had intimated, as quiet as possible, nobody being present but Mr Wilcoxon's relative, the army agent, and his wife, as witnesses. Immediately after the conclusion of the rite, Mr Wilcoxon made the formal offer of the clerkship to George. He found the lad mooning alone in the garden. He

had not chosen to be present in the church, and he felt too much out of heart to go about any of his favourite employments. He answered Mr Wilcoxon shortly that he did not like the life suggested to him. He would rather be anything than a clerk in a factory.

"You will find it difficult to be anything else," said Mr Wilcoxon quietly. "Your mother tells me— "

"My mother is dead," said George. "You mean Mrs Wilcoxon, I suppose?"

"I do mean Mrs Wilcoxon, young gentleman," returned the other; "and you will be pleased henceforth to speak of her by that name. She tells me that you wish to enter the army."

"I wish my father's promise to be performed," exclaimed George.

"His promise," repeated Mr Wilcoxon. "There is no evidence that he made such a promise. And if he had," he continued, sharply, as he saw George about to interrupt him, "if he had, my conscience would not allow anything of the kind to be done."

"Your conscience— " began George, contemptuously.

"My conscience," repeated Mr Wilcoxon, more sternly than before. "Just attend to me. Mrs Wilcoxon and myself are going away presently, and do not mean to return to Wickfield for nearly two months. You have that time to reconsider this matter. I shall hear your final resolve when I come back. If you reject my offers then, I shall not repeat them."

## CHAPTER IX.

### GEORGE'S LETTER.

"Poor George," said Cressingham, when Burton had reached this point in the narrative; "it is hard lines upon him indeed! On what day did Mrs Alford's marriage take place? Do you happen to know?"

"Yes," said Burton. "I know it, because George wrote to me on that very day. It was the sixteenth of June."

"And her husband was killed on the eighteenth of June in the previous year!" said Cressingham. "It is a pity she did not wait two days more. That would have been a remarkable way of celebrating the anniversary of his death! She must be a strange article, that lady!"

"Yes, one would think it must have been done to insult General Alford's memory," observed Burton, "only that one knows from George that she had a reason for having it then. Anyway, however, it shows that she cared very little for appearances. As for Wilcoxon, I don't suppose he cared for them at all."

"The two months must be pretty nearly up now," said Cressingham. "Has George been living all this time at Wickfield?"

"Yes," replied Burton, "living all alone by himself in his step-mother's house. He would willingly have been anywhere else, but he couldn't help himself. My aunt refused to allow me to invite him over here, and she wouldn't let me go over to Wickfield to see him. She is so furious with Mrs Alford for having married Wilcoxon, that she can hardly endure the mention of the name. I judge poor old George has had a hard time of it. It will come to an end soon now; but I fear he wont be much the better for it when it does."

"What, the Wilcoxons are coming back?" suggested Cressingham.

"Yes," returned Burton. "I received a letter about ten days ago, telling me what had happened during the last fortnight. Would you like to hear the letter, Fred? There is nothing in it, but what you may hear. He says I may read it to you."

"I should like it very much," said Cressingham. "Let us sit down under the shade of this oak, and you can read it out."

They sat down accordingly among the roots of the old tree, and Burton took out George's letter, which covered four sides of one of the large sheets of paper of those days.

EAST STREET, WICKFIELD,
*August 4th*, 1816.

MY DEAR CLEM,—I told you in my last that I had heard nothing from Mr Wilcoxon or Mrs Wilcoxon either, since they left England; nor had any of the servants heard. To-day, however, there has come a letter to the housekeeper, telling her that they were setting off on their homeward journey, and will be in Wickfield in about a fortnight. Then I suppose

we shall have it out. It wont be a pleasant business, I expect. Mr Knyvett has failed, I am sorry to say, in learning anything about Major, or, as it appears, he ought to be called Colonel Baynton. Mr Knyvett has had an answer from a gentleman who lives in New Orleans. He says that a great many wounded English officers were taken to the hospitals in the city after the retreat of our troops, and some were received into English families residing in New Orleans or the neighbourhood. He had ascertained that no officer named Baynton had been brought as a patient to any hospital, but could not learn much about the others. He thought, however, that if Major Baynton had been among those who were taken charge of by one of the neighbouring gentry, he must in all likelihood have died long before this, or recovered and left the country. I must own that there seems but little ground for hope; and that, I can see, is Mr Knyvett's opinion also. But I don't mean to give up, while there is any hope at all.

If Baynton is dead, of course all chance of my entering the army is at an end, unless I enlist as a private soldier, as I have once or twice been half disposed to do. I sometimes think I may do so still, if Wilcoxon continues to bully me. I would certainly rather serve in the ranks than be his clerk. I declare I think I hate him worse and worse every day. There is no end to his meanness and trickery. I told you at the beginning of this letter that no one had heard anything about him since he went off on his wedding tour. But I ought to have said that no one in East Street had heard of him. The Bowles's have heard something of him, and he of them. There is a fellow now hanging about Wickfield—a fellow called Carr—cur he ought to be called—a money-lender

living in Ship Street. He is one of Wilcoxon's agents, or rather one of the tools with which he does his dirty work. It seems this nail factory of his must be enlarged, if it is to answer, and it can only be enlarged by building over Bowles's ground. I have told you before of his ineffectual attempts to get possession by requiring Bowles to execute repairs, and then by raising his rent. Now he has tried a third dodge.

I told you, I think, that Tom and Bill Bowles had brought home a heap of money, which they meant to lay out in setting up their father and themselves in business. They resolved, after much deliberation, to buy a brig, by means of which they would be able to supply the Wickfield people with coals, cheaper than they can get them now. But the brig would cost more money than their savings would amount to, though they had saved a goodish sum. They wanted to borrow a thousand pounds, giving their property here as a security for it. One day about six weeks ago or thereabouts, just after Wilcoxon's departure, Carr came down to see old Bowles. He said he had some money which he wished to put out at five per cent. interest. He had been told that Mr Bowles wanted to borrow a few hundreds. If so, he would be very glad to accommodate him. What security did he propose to give? Bowles was taken in by the fellow's manner. Five per cent. would be very easy terms for the loan, and the security he proposed to give, his furniture and stock-in-trade, among which of course the brig would be included, was pronounced by Carr to be perfectly satisfactory. The old boatman was very near consenting, but it had occurred to him that he ought to consult his sons first, as a large part of the money invested would be theirs. Carr tried hard to induce him to change his resolu-

tion, and at length took his departure, promising to return for the final answer on the following day.

When Tom and William Bowles came home in the evening they were not quite so well pleased with the offer as their father had been.

"If all is above-board," observed Tom, "we couldn't do better than accept the terms. But I don't altogether fancy what I have heard about this man Carr."

"What have you heard about him?" asked Bill.

"Well, I've heard that he has lent money to several people who were hard up, and made them pay ten and twelve per cent. for it. I don't understand why he should lower his terms so much to us. He has a bad name in Wickfield, and I don't fancy putting myself into his power."

"There's something in that, Tom," said his father, "and I must say I don't fancy the man myself, nor his wanting me to settle the matter without speaking to you. Still if the offer is made in good faith, it is better than we are likely to get elsewhere."

"I'll tell you what we can do, father," says Bill; "we can go up and ask lawyer Knyvett about it. He's always been our good friend, and has promised to borrow this money for us, if he can. He knows pretty nearly everything about people round about here. He'll advise us what to do."

"This was voted a bright idea; and the next day accordingly the old man paid Mr Knyvett a visit. The latter listened to his story in silence, and when he had ended said briefly, "Take Carr's money, and bring the copy of the agreement which you sign up to me."

Bowles thanked Mr Knyvett and went home. The next

day Carr came, and Bowles faithfully obeyed the lawyer's instructions. He agreed to borrow the money on the terms offered, and to give all his property, of whatsoever kind (in which, of course, the new brig was included), as security. Carr produced an agreement ready drawn up in duplicate, which Bowles signed, retaining, of course, one of the duplicates. The money lender then handed over ten bank notes of one hundred pounds each, and took his departure.

Bowles only waited till he was quite clear of the premises, and then went up to Mr Knyvett's office with the bank notes and the agreement.

"It's all right," said the solicitor, as he ran his eye over the paper. "You can proceed now as quickly as you please. You have seen a brig which you think would suit you, have you not, Bowles?"

"Yes, sir, and she's a regular beauty, and a capital bargain too," replied the old man. "With this money and the boys' savings we shall be able to pay for her right down."

"That's all right then," said Mr Knyvett. "You mean to leave these bank notes with me, I suppose, as well as the agreement? Very well, I will take charge of them. I have your sons' money already, you know. It is deposited with my bankers at interest. When do you mean to pay for the brig? What is its name, by the way?"

"They call her the *Caroline*, sir. We haven't any thought of changing the name."

"Very well; when you want to pay for the *Caroline*, send the owner up to me."

Well, Clem, the old chap went home as jolly as a sand-

boy. They bought the brig, brought her round to Wickfield, and were making their arrangements to sail for Newcastle with a cargo on board, which they meant to sell in Newcastle and return with coals, when they received another visit from Carr. He appeared to be in great alarm and distress.

"You haven't paid away the money I lent you yet, have you?" he asked.

"Not paid it away?" repeated Bowles. "Why, of course I have. The *Caroline* was paid for when she was handed over to us. It was agreed that she should be."

"O dear, dear, was there ever anything so unfortunate," says Carr. "I've had some terrible losses in business, and I must have this money back, or I shall be ruined."

"Have the money back," says Bowles. "Of course, you'll have it back in time. We mean to pay you off bit by bit, as we makes our money, but, to be sure, you don't expect us to pay you back now, when we've only just had it. Why, we haven't had time to make a sixpence yet."

"I can't help it, Mr Bowles," says the rascal. "Perhaps you can borrow it of some one else. I should be sorry to inconvenience you any way, but I should be obliged, if you can't raise it in any way, to sell your furniture here, I am afraid, and the *Caroline*, too. O dear, was there ever anything so unlucky?"

"Sell our furniture and the *Caroline*," cried Bowles. "I don't see how you can do that. Why, we have only just had the money, and, of course, you must have known that we couldn't repay you—the whole of it, that is—for a long time to come."

"There wasn't any time named in the bond, was there?" asked Carr.

"I don't know as there was," returned the other, "but it must have been understood so."

"I didn't understand it in that way," says Carr, "and I'm afraid my creditors wouldn't agree to my allowing you time. But see here, Mr Bowles, you've a long lease of these premises, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Bowles, drily, "a thirty years' lease, and about six of 'em have run out."

"Well, I daresay you could get something handsome for that. In fact, I shouldn't mind if you'd make that over to me—"

"Ah, now I see what you're at, Master Carr," cries the old man. "You'll just be pleased to get out of this house without more words, and you'll be wise to do it pretty quick, for if my lads were to come home and hear what you'd come for, they might give you something you wouldn't like."

"I am not afraid of them, or you either," says the fellow, changing his tone; "and I give you notice that if you don't pay me within two days, I'll sell you up without more ado."

Bowles went up to Mr Knyvett with a very woe-begone face, and told his story. Knyvett listened to it, but didn't seem to pity Bowles as much as he had expected.

"It's a sad business," he said, "but I'll do the best I can for you. We must see if I can't persuade him to give you a little time. Appoint him to meet me here to-morrow about the same time, and we'll see what can be done."

Carr didn't very much like going to Mr Knyvett's office, but he couldn't very well help himself.

"Good morning," says Mr Knyvett; "good morning, Mr Carr. This isn't the first time we've met, I think, is it?"

"I don't remember having had the honour of being in your company before," replies the money-lender.

"Not at Portsmouth some four years ago, Mr Carr? There was a sailor, Andrew Clark, I think his name was, who had been robbed of his money in one of the dens there. Ah, you don't remember; never mind that. Well, you want the thousand pounds here that you lent Mr Bowles back again, I'm told, and at very short notice, for he hasn't had the money a month yet. I think you're rather hard upon him, Mr Carr."

"I assure you, sir, it distresses me very much to put Mr Bowles to any inconvenience. But my position is one of great urgency. I should be sold up myself—"

"That would be a pity," said Mr Knyvett, drily. "You deposited with me the copy of the bond, did you not, Bowles?" he resumed, turning to the boatman; and then opening his desk, "yes, here it is, and here are the numbers of the notes that you gave Mr Bowles. Look at it, and see if it is correct."

"Quite correct, sir," said Carr; "there is no doubt of the accuracy of the transaction."

"You had better verify them yourself, then," said Mr Knyvett, tossing over a bundle of bank notes to him. "You will see that they are precisely the same that you gave him. There, you scoundrel, take yourself out of my office, and be thankful that this attempt to ruin an honest man has failed. I would advise you also to take yourself out of Wickfield, or Andrew Clark may be making inquiries after the crimp who pillaged him. Bowles," he goes on, "I have taken the liberty of lending you this money myself at the same rate of interest which this rascal offered you. I shall give you rather longer time than he proposed to do."

Wasn't that glorious, Clem? Frank Knyvett, who was present, told me Carr left the room white with rage, threatening that he would pay the Bowles's out for it yet. But they've no need to fear him. I had heard of the poor old fellow's trouble, and had gone down to comfort him as well as I could. I found Tom and Bill and the old woman waiting for Bowles's return, all very much down in the mouth. But by and bye the old man comes in, radiant with joy, and tells the story. You should have seen how delighted they were! I hear Carr has already left Wickfield, but I judge he has written to tell Wilcoxon what has happened, and he'll be none the less savage with me, as he always fancies that I back up the Bowles's; and, indeed, he's not far wrong in that. Meanwhile the *Caroline* is all but ready to sail. Tom and Bill have gone to Portsmouth to try and pick up a few hands to complete the crew, and then they'll be off. They are such good fellows that I should like to go as second mate on board the brig with them.

This is a long letter, Clem; but I know you are interested in these matters, and wont be tired. Remember me to Fred and Scott and the others, and believe me, your affect. friend,

GEORGE ALFORD.

*P.S.*—You may tell the above to Fred Cressingham, if you like. But if I should resolve on leaving Wickfield, though I shall certainly tell you everything, I must ask you to keep *that* entirely to yourself. Wilcoxon, though he talks a good deal about allowing me to go my own way, &c., has no idea of really permitting anything of the kind. He'd be sure to send after me if he knew where I was gone, and hunt me down. It must be a secret between you and me.

Burton read the whole of the letter, except the postscript, aloud. Then he folded it up, and there was a silence of some minutes. Presently Cressingham spoke.

"It's a burning shame," he said; "but I am afraid George hasn't much chance with a fellow like Wilcoxon, who seems to be something between a Yankee attorney and a Jew money lender. Well, I suppose, you'll hear from him again, Clem, pretty soon now, and then everything will have been settled."

"Yes, I expect to hear in a day or two at furthest," replied Burton. "George has still two or three days of his two months left, but he may not wait the whole time before having it out with his step-father. Well, let us go in now, Fred; it's just upon the time, and I see the other fellows coming up from the shore."

Nothing was talked of that evening in the schoolroom, except the trial of skill with pistols on the beach, and the match which was to come off at the end of the ensuing week. Graves's party were the most eager of any, notwithstanding that Graves himself took no part in the discussion.

"I have got a letter to show you, Jerry," he said, drawing Taunton on one side. "It has just come. Clara has seen Mr Lumley about the money."

"Was the old chap in a good humour?" inquired Taunton.

"No, he wasn't," answered Graves. "Clara says she never saw him so surly. He went on about my extravagance, as he called it, by the yard; and there was no pulling him up. He'll come round by-and-bye, but not this side of Christmas, I expect."

"What a bore," said Taunton. "I must write and tell

Reginald. I had given him to understand that you would certainly take the gun and pistols. I am afraid he'll be a good deal disappointed. And how about this pistol match too? I take it for granted you meant to use my cousin's pistols to win that, as you'd be safe to do, if you shot with them— "

"I think I could answer for that," observed Graves. "I've hit a half-crown three times running with them at a dozen yards. It would be odd if I couldn't hit a ginger-beer bottle."

"I know, I know," said Taunton. "But if you can't get these pistols, and are driven to use old Grimes's again, and Temple borrows some first-rate articles—as very likely he will —what's to happen then? Really, I think you had better say you can't get any decent pistols, and give the thing up. None of our set would like to see you beaten— "

"I don't mean to be beaten," said Graves, "and I *do* mean to shoot the match. I've agreed to shoot it, and that is enough. Look here, Jerry, though Lumley wouldn't give Clara the money she asked for, he did give her five guineas, which she has sent me. That, with the money I have in my purse, will be enough to buy the pistols."

"To be sure it will," cried Taunton, joyfully. "Hand over the dibs, and I'll write this very night to Reginald, and tell him to send the pistols off by the coach. There will be heaps of time to get them between this and Saturday week."

"Well, not too much time," rejoined Graves. "It is a two days' post to your cousin's place, and the coach will be gone when he receives it, on Saturday. The coach is two days in getting to London, and the journey here takes a day more. They can't be here before Wednesday afternoon."

"Never mind, Wednesday afternoon will be soon enough,"

rejoined Taunton. "Well, I shall enjoy seeing Temple taken down, I must say that, and so will Dilke, and Payne, and Dick Rawes. I'll sit down and write immediately."

Nor were Temple's backers less anxious for their champion's success. Charlie found Wright and Winburne in possession of his study, when he returned after the pistol shooting. They were eager to tell him all about Graves's usage of them—of which Temple as yet had heard nothing—and to learn the rights about the shooting match, of which only imperfect rumours had reached them. The two narratives, with the running comments made on them, took up a good deal of time, and it wanted only a few minutes to prayers, when they were completed.

"You beat him then, Charlie," exclaimed Wright, when he had heard all. "I am glad of that, anyway. I should like to have seen his face when he missed, and you hit!"

"Yes," said Winburne, "I had made a vow that I would have nothing to do with him for the future, the sulky, cowardly brute—"

"Draw it mild, Jack," said Temple. "He *is* sulky and he *may* be a brute, but he's *not* a coward. You didn't see him with Nep to-day, or you wouldn't call him one."

"He's a bully," said Winburne, "and a bully is almost always a coward."

"Well, I hardly should call Graves a bully," said Temple. "He doesn't care how much he hurts a fellow, no doubt, but I don't think he hurts him for the mere pleasure of hurting him. If you leave him alone, I believe he'd leave you."

"Well, anyway, as I was saying," resumed Winburne, "I have made a vow to have nothing to do with him for the future,

but I should have broken it upon the first day, to have seen him beaten at pistol shooting—the thing which he thinks he can do better than anyone else."

"Well, you'll have an opportunity of seeing him beaten again," remarked Wright. "I'll go bail for it, Charlie will give him just as sound a licking next Saturday week, as he did to-day."

"No, you mustn't expect that," said Temple. "In the first place, on consideration I don't think that I shall shoot the match at all. I did say I would shoot it, no doubt. I was a good deal provoked. But I half think that it is a promise which I ought not to keep. I gave my mother my promise last holidays that I wouldn't break any of the rules of the school. I have kept the promise up till now. Perhaps Hepburn might think that the wearing the gipsy's clothes was a breach of the rules, but I didn't and don't. There was no positive rule that was broken by it. But there *is* a well known rule, and one on which the Doctor insists, that no fellow here shall use firearms. Burton and Cressingham were right when they said so to-day, and I wish I had followed their advice.

"There is something in that, Charlie," said Wright, "and if you had refused at the time, it would have been all right. But here you see you have made a positive engagement. I daresay some of the fellows have made wagers about it; and certainly Graves and his friends will crow over you, and all our set. I think you had better say that when this match has come off, you wont shoot another. But this match you must shoot."

"I suppose I must," assented Temple, reluctantly. "But I'm sorry for it."

"You will not be very sorry for it, when Graves has had a sound drubbing," remarked Winburne.

"Graves won't get a sound drubbing," rejoined Temple. "It was mere accident my hitting to-day as I did, and Graves would not have missed if the bullets had fitted the pistols. I have had more practice no doubt than Rawes fancies, but I'm no match for Graves, who really is a crack shot. Besides there's another thing. I chanced to overhear Rawes talking to Dilke and Payne an hour or two ago. He was telling them that Graves is going to send for a pair of splendid pistols from home or somewhere, with which he can knock the ace of clubs out of a card. No, I shall be safe to be beaten, but it isn't that that I mind so much."

"As for getting a good brace of pistols," observed Winburne, "two can play at that. Why shouldn't you get a first chop article, Charlie?"

"Where am I to get it from?" asked Temple.

"Where from?" repeated Winburne. "Anywhere I should think. Good pistols are not such very rare things."

"They are in this neighbourhood, I am afraid," remarked Wright. "Colonel Wilder has some good pistols. Dolman told me so. He said the Colonel often sent his guns and pistols to his shop to be repaired or cleaned, and some of them were as first-rate articles as he had ever seen. But then, of course, the Colonel wouldn't lend them even if he was asked. He knows old Thornton's rules, and wouldn't connive at their being broken."

"Well," said Winburne, "Charlie might get a pistol for the day from Dolman himself. I know he has some splendid articles in his shop—second-hand pistols, some of them, which

he wouldn't mind lending if we paid him, say, five shillings for the hire. I am sure your friends, Charlie, would willingly subscribe that."

"Dolman will be almost as unlikely to lend his pistols as the Colonel," observed Wright. "Dolman is a cutler as well as a gunsmith, you know, and the Doctor has a lot of things at his shop in the course of the year. If Dolman should be detected in lending firearms to the fellows, he would lose Thornton's custom most likely, and he'd hardly run the risk of doing that for five shillings."

"Well, anyway, we might get Harry Wilder to borrow the pistols," rejoined Winburne. "He'd do it at once if we asked him, and Dolman could have no reason for refusing him. What do you think of that, Charlie?"

"I daresay I could get a pistol, if that were all," said Temple, "from somewhere or other. You may leave that to me. Well, I'll shoot the match. But it's only for this once, remember! I'll never do it again."

Only this once! How many boys and men too owe their ruin to that ill-omened phrase. Of all the baits with which the devil dresses his hook, there is none more deadly than that same phrase, "only this once."

## CHAPTER X.

### A SMUGGLER'S DEN.

RAWES's complaint—that it always rained on half-holidays—seemed to have some truth in it. The Friday in the ensuing week began, and seemed likely to end, with steady, soaking rain. It was not until three in the afternoon that it condescended to cease, and then the boys agreed that the only sport possible for them under the circumstances would be what they were wont to call, "Hare's hide-and-seek." The tides happened to be at their lowest, so that it was possible for the boys to make their way along the shore as far as Crawley Point, and return round Cockle Head, before the tide came in. The game was a sort of combination of a paper-chase and hide-and-seek. They carried the scent, as in the first-named pastime. But instead of continuing their course until they reached home again, they were wont to hide themselves in some one of the numerous caves, into which the Hanger Cliffs were broken. These in many instances contained narrow passages winding far back into the rock, and deep hollows over-grown with long weeds, which afforded capital hiding places. If they failed to find the hares in ten minutes after entering the cave, the victory was considered to rest with the latter, if before that time, with their pursuers.

"Who'll be hare?" said Charlie Temple, as he handed a bundle of old newspapers and exercises to some of the juniors, who proceeded to tear them in pieces. "It ought to be some big fellow, as the running will be very heavy to-day. Will you be one, Graves?"

"Jerry and I have some business in Walescliff," said Graves, "or I would."

"Why shouldn't you be one of the hares yourself, Charlie?" asked Wright.

"I hurt my foot at cricket yesterday," said Temple. "I shall be able, I daresay, to keep up with the ruck, but I couldn't go ahead."

"I'll be one of the hares," said Cressingham, "if you like it. Will you be the other, Clement?" He laid his hand on his friend's shoulder as he spoke.

Burton started. He had been engaged in the perusal of a letter which had arrived by the morning's post, and was apparently so much interested, that he was unaware of what was passing. "I've no objection," he said. "We shall go under Hanger's Cliffs, I suppose. Let us start at once."

The bags containing the scraps of paper known as "the scent" were handed to the two boys, and they set off at the long swinging trot, which is the orthodox pace in this particular sport, while the others remained behind the prescribed time, before setting off in pursuit. The sea-shore was soon reached. Cockle Head was gained, and then Burton and Cressingham subsided into a steady pace along the hard, moist sand which stretched without interruption for miles under Hanger's Cliffs.

They had proceeded for more than three miles, and had

reached the mouth of what seemed to be little more than a narrow slit in the rock, when Cressingham called upon his companion to stop.

"Here'll be the place, Clem ; let us locate ourselves here, as the Yankees say. That projecting rock entirely screens us from the hounds. They won't be able to tell what has become of us."

"What, hide in Hanger's Cave itself," said Burton, in some surprise. "All the hiding places there are as well known as the seats in the play-ground. We shall be caught in a minute if we hide there."

"Ah, so you think," said Cressingham, "but if you'll go inside, you'll see reason to change your opinion."

"Very well," said Burton, dropping a handful of scent as he spoke. Let's go in and see this place of yours."

They entered accordingly, and presently found themselves in a spacious, semicircular hollow, the ground rising in a succession of shelves, resembling a rude amphitheatre. In some places the action of the waves had formed deep holes. In others there were natural fissures, running a long way back into the rock. In some of these passages had been cut, so as to make one cavity communicate with another. Report said that these hollows were sometimes used as receptacles for smuggled goods. But as the passage to the cliffs above could only be made by swarming up a rope thrown down from the summit, and heavy goods could not have been raised without the help of a crane, this story was generally disbelieved.

"You have heard old Gunn's stories about this place, I suppose," said Burton. "He persists in it that twenty years ago, before the coast-guard was established out at Crawley

Point yonder, no end of smuggling went on here. But I never believed him."

"Nor did I," said Cressingham, "until last summer. What I am going to show you, altered my opinion, and I guess it will alter yours too."

As he spoke he climbed up to the highest of the shelves, which formed the back of the cave, and entered a huge cleft about six feet high. It ran for a dozen feet or so straight into the rock, and then turning sharply to the left, was continued for about the same distance, when it ended abruptly.

"Do you know this passage, Clem?" he asked.

"Know it?" returned Burton. "Of course I know it. What fellow in Holmwood doesn't know it, I should like to know. There used to be a sort of niche to the left into which a fellow could just thrust himself. Ay, here it is," he resumed a minute afterwards. "This would do very well, Fred, for one of us to hide in if the fellows had never played hide-and-seek here before. But as soon as they find we have gone in here, I'll answer for it they'll go straight to this place the first thing."

"Wait a bit," said Cressingham. "You say you know the passage, but do you happen to know this?" He thrust his hand as he spoke into what seemed a small fissure, and undid apparently some fastening, for a solid slab of stone, which must have been fully six feet high and more than two wide, swung noiselessly on one side, and showed a long narrow passage beyond.

"By Jove," exclaimed Burton, invoking, after the fashion of schoolboys, the heathen sire of gods and men, "how did you come to find that out?"

"By the merest accident. It was just the last day of last half, or rather, I should say, it was the first day of the holidays. Somehow or other I contrived to miss the coach, and there was no getting away from Walescliff until the next day. I did not know what on earth to do with myself, and at last resolved to take one of old Gunn's boats and row along under Hanger Cliffs carrying my luncheon with me. The day was dreadfully hot, and this cave was the coolest place I could find. I took my lunch up into this hollow. After finishing it I laid down and had a nap. By-and-by I woke up and was going away, but I couldn't find my knife. I fancied that I had stuck it into a crevice of the rock. I put my hand into one of these and began feeling about. Presently I laid hold of something cold. It was not the handle of my knife, but a knob of iron, which proved to be the end of a bolt, running, I suppose, into the stone slab, for the moment I pulled it towards me, the slab swung open as you saw it do just now."

"Well, that was a rum go," said Burton. "Did you go up to see where the path leads to?"

"I went up some way," answered Cressingham, "far enough to make sure that it ran directly to the top of the cliff. But it was getting very late, and I thought they would make a row at Holmwood if I wasn't at home by supper-time. I should fancy there must be a fine view out to sea from the top."

"I make no doubt there is," assented Burton. "Look here, Fred; it's plain enough what this means. The smugglers had been in the habit of landing their cargoes here, and stowing them in this secret passage. Then they would take themselves off the same way they came. By-and-by their

mates would come down under cover of night and carry the goods off. Most probably the other end of the passage is stopped in very much the same way as this is, so that no one could know anything of its existence unless he went up in a balloon. I remember now to have heard George Alford saying that there was some secret path by which people could get to Spurling and the country round about, without passing either by the landing place at Crawley Point, where the Preventive Station is, or Walescliff itself, and so pass close to Baines's house. This must be the place."

"I daresay you are right," rejoined Cressingham. "Suppose we go up now and search for the further entrance. We have plenty of time."

"All right," said Burton. "We had better shut the slab after us, it is easily enough opened from this side." "Hallo," he added, a moment afterwards, "what's that row down below? If any of the smugglers are coming we had better make a bolt for it."

"No, it's not the smugglers, Clem," said Cressingham, laughing. "You have forgotten the time of day, I think. It's Charlie Temple and Wright and Winburne, and the rest of them. They've traced us as far as the cave, and are just beginning to search it. They'll be properly sold!"

The two boys stopped for a few minutes to listen with amusement to the cries of perplexity and wonder, which were plainly enough audible. Then they began climbing the rocky path. This they found wound after a very irregular fashion, sometimes between high upright crags, completely screening it on either side, and sometimes through passages which had been cut through the rock. At last they came to a place where the

road divided into a fork—one passage leading downwards, and closed very nearly after the same fashion as at the other end, the other as plainly proceeding upwards to the summit of the cliffs. Cressingham wanted to stop and discover the mode of opening the secret door, but Burton advised mounting to the summit first. They were hot and tired with the ascent, he said, and it would be pleasant to sit down and rest up above, enjoying the seaward prospect. When they had had enough of that, they could find the way out, and return that way to Holmwood.

Cressingham assented, and after climbing the narrow ascent, which was here almost as steep as a ladder, and consisted in many places of steps hewn by manual labour, they emerged on a small level platform, on the top of an isolated crag.

"This is the place where the fellows used to keep their look-out," said Burton. "Look, Fred, anyone standing here can see any boat coming from either Deadman's Point or Walescliff on one side, or from Curlew Island on the other, not to speak of any boat from Crawley Point. They could see it half-an-hour at least before it could reach the cave."

"I wonder those two fellows that we picked off the Quoits the other day didn't make for this cave," observed Cressingham.

"No, they wanted to get to Wickfield, and meant to have swum beyond Walescliff Bay," said Burton, hastily; "or rather," he added, correcting himself in some confusion, "it is most likely that was their reason. You know they said something about wanting to get there."

"Ay, to be sure," said Cressingham, "and besides the tide runs so sharp from Crawley Point to Cockle Head, that I

don't suppose that they could have forced their way out of it. Look at that boat, which has come, I suppose, from Deadman's Point. See what a wide berth it is obliged to give Cockle Head."

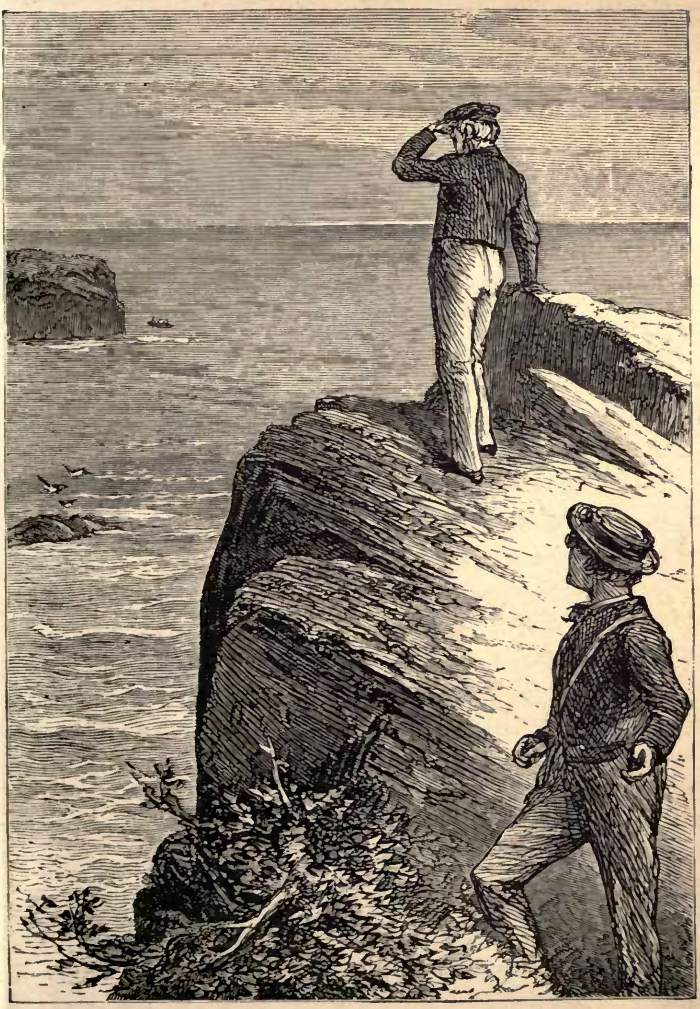
"I see it," said Burton. "It's going to Horncombe or Curlew Island most probably. People often go that way by sea. It saves a long land journey."

They sat down and watched the little vessel, as it slowly made its way, continually making tacks. Presently the attention of the two friends was attracted by voices immediately below them. Looking over the edge of the crag, they saw that the whole posse of Holmwood boys, having explored every crevice of the cave without success, were on the point of returning homeward by the sands.

"Sold out and out," exclaimed Cressingham. "I say, Clem, I should like to wrap a piece of paper round this stone, write my name on it, and throw it down among them. They can't possibly see us up here. How it would puzzle them!"

"Don't do that, Fred, I don't want them to find out this secret passage, or at all events I wouldn't tell it to the whole school. We may have some more fun with it on some future day."

"As you like," said Cressingham. "There they go," he continued, as the boys ran off, the seniors taking it easy, and the younger boys exerting themselves to keep up with their elders. There they go, and will be at home in an hour's time. Talking of that, Clem, hadn't we better be off ourselves. We have a much shorter distance to go than they have, but we may be some time in finding the fastenings of



"LOOK AT THAT BOAT.'

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the secret door, and I should like to be at home before they arrive. Won't you come?"

"I'll come presently, but not this minute," answered Burton. "I want to sit here a little longer. But do you go down, Fred, and find the entrance. If you'll leave it open I'll follow you in a short time; I daresay I shall overtake you before you reach Spurling village."

Cressingham assented. He climbed down the steep stone staircase and was soon lost to sight. Burton leant over the parapet of the rock with his eyes fixed on the boat, which had now approached within a hundred yards of the shore.

Meanwhile the other boys were returning along the shore, a good deal puzzled, and some of them disposed to be out of humour.

"Where in the world could they have got to?" asked Hill. "I thought I knew Hanger's Cave pretty well; but I hunted every nook and corner of it, and they certainly could not have been there."

"I don't believe they ever went in," said Payne; "and it is contrary to the rules of the game to try and sell fellows after that fashion."

"They must have been in there, only too well hidden to be discovered," observed Lander. "Didn't you see the scent lying about at the entrance of the cave?"

"Yes, we all saw that," said Rawes. "But I judge Burton and Cressingham just ran in for a moment, and then ran out again. Most likely they made a spurt of it round Trawler's Gate and so home by Spurling."

"Trawler's Gate," repeated Hill, "why, that's ever so far on almost as far as Crawley Point."

"I know that," said Rawes. "But there would have been time for them to have reached it before we got round Hanger's Nose if they put on best speed."

"But you forget," urged Hill, "that it would be against the rules of the game to do that. They would have been bound to drop a lot of the scent in some conspicuous place beyond the entrance to the cave if they had gone on. I took the trouble to run some distance beyond the cave towards Trawler's Gate, and there was not a scrap of paper anywhere."

"Burton wouldn't care, or Cressingham either, for the rules of the game if they wanted to sell us," rejoined Rawes.

"You have no right to say that," cried Hill and Lander in the same breath. "I don't know any fellow less likely to do an unfair thing like that, than Clem Burton," added Hill.

"Or than Fred Cressingham," added Lander.

"Oh ay, you always stand up for your favourites," retorted Rawes impatiently.

"I don't know whom you mean by 'my favourites,'" began Hill, "but ——"

"Don't let us have another jaw," interposed Temple. "There has been plenty of that article and to spare during the last few days, and we are likely, I am afraid, to have more of it. No one can have any right to say that Burton and Cressingham would do anything unfair. I don't suppose anybody really thinks so. They might have done what Rawes supposes by way of a joke, but in no other way."

"That's your opinion, is it?" asked Rawes.

"That's my opinion," repeated Temple.

Nothing more was said. The party trudged on in silence,

until they had entered the lane leading to the Priory. Then Temple took out his watch.

"Ten minutes past the half hour, I declare," he said. "What a time we have been coming home."

"Not longer than usual, I think," observed Wright, "and we are in plenty of time. The gate won't be locked for more than half-an-hour."

"I daresay, George," said Temple in a lower tone, "but I was to have met—you know whom, at half-past five exactly—met him at Manson's gate, and I am afraid I shall miss him. And even if that doesn't happen, I shall very likely be late myself."

"Miss him—miss Harry Wilder, ye mane?" exclaimed O'Toole, who had overheard his words.

Temple looked annoyed. "It is no business of yours, O'Toole," he said crossly, "whom I may be going to meet!"

"Not the least taste in life," returned Maurice; "only if it's Harry Wilder ye're thinking of, ye'll be glad to know that if ye have missed him, he hasn't missed you. See yonder where he sits on the stile, with his hands in his pockets. Will I give him a hail?"

"No, no," rejoined Temple hastily. "I'll just run up and speak to him. Go on, please, I'll run after you and catch you before you reach the house, or any way soon afterwards."

He hurried off and the others walked on.

"I thought Temple had promised to give Harry Wilder up," observed Dilke, with one of his sneers. "Didn't we hear so, Maurice?"

"To be sure we did," replied the Irishman. "We were told that Temple had promised his father—though, to be sure,

he's dead—perhaps it was Harry Wilder's father, but for certain he had promised somebody that he wouldn't meet Harry Wilder again, even if Harry met him. There was a regular shindy, you know. Temple had been up at the King's Arms playing billiards with Harry and some one else, and had lost a power of money ——"

"Had *won* a power of money, you mean, Maurice," broke in Rawes. "It was Colonel Wilder complained that Harry had lost ever so much. He didn't think all had been fair ——"

"If you are determined to rake up an old story which had better be forgotten, at all events you had better stick to the facts," cried Wright indignantly. "I know what passed well enough to say that no one ever accused Charlie of anything unfair, and he hadn't won money: he had lost it. It was of breaking the rules of the school in going to the King's Arms that he was accused. I know the Colonel thinks very well of Charlie, and has never forbidden Harry to be friends with him —only he wont let them meet often during the half-year, because it is contrary to the Doctor's rules."

"That's all very fine," said Rawes; "but I am not to be bamboozled that way. I know they were forbidden to meet any more—not during the half-year only, but not at all. Temple promised that, or he would not have been let off so easy."

"Do you mean to insinuate that Charlie is breaking his word in meeting Harry Wilder now?" exclaimed Winburne indignantly.

"It looks rather like it," returned Rawes.

"Musha, be easy, Dick," interposed O'Toole. "Ye're

coming it a trifle too strong. No one knows what took place on the occasion ye refer to except the Doctor and Colonel Wilder, and, to be sure, Charlie Temple himself— "

"And Temple has been too wise to say anything about it," supplemented Rawes.

"Shut your potato trap, my jewel," cried Maurice, a good deal provoked at the interruption. "Shut your potato trap, and give your red rag a holiday! Ye're talking without book, as they say. Charlie Temple isn't very fond of you, Dick Rawes, or of Stephen Graves, or maybe of me either, but he is a gentleman and a man of his word for all that."

"Bravo, Maurice," cried Wright, "let us shake a fist upon it. I don't know for certain what Charlie may want with Harry Wilder, or Harry Wilder with Charlie, but I'll wager a handsome sum that it is nothing to be ashamed of."

"You are welcome to your opinion," said Rawes coldly. "I shall keep mine."

"And welcome," said O'Toole. "I don't want it, I'm sure. Well, Fred," he continued, addressing Cressingham, who was standing at the gate in company with Tom Cobbe awaiting their arrival, "so you and Burton have got home before us."

"I have got home," answered Cressingham. "Clement hasn't come in yet, I am expecting him every moment."

"Here he is," shouted half-a-dozen voices, as Burton came running up splashed from head to foot, and his face very red, as though he had run a great distance without stopping.

"Here he is," repeated O'Toole, "the very man and no other. How did ye manage to get out of that cave now, I wonder. Ye didn't go beyond it unless a bird carried ye off

on its back, like Baron Munchausen. I looked for your footsteps, and they hadn't gone a yard beyond the cave."

"No, we didn't go beyond the cave, Maurice," said Cressingham, noticing that Burton looked embarrassed, "not a yard beyond it, as you say."

"And how did ye get out, then, I'd like to know?" continued Maurice. "Have ye got a coat of darkness, like Jack the Giant Killer, or were ye hid cunningly after all, in some corner we couldn't find?"

"That's tellings, Maurice," said Cressingham, laughing. "I know what I know."

"And Tom Cobbe here looks as if he knew what he knew," added Wright. "Well, Tom, what is it?"

"I was directed by the Doctor to tell the young gentlemen, that he desired their presence in the school-room as soon as I had locked the gate," replied the school servant.

"Our presence—in the school-room," repeated Wright. "Is there going to be any row?"

"There is mostly what you are pleased to call 'a row,' Mr Wright, when the young gentlemen gets together, and the fact is to be regretted," replied Tom sedately. "But I am not aware that there is likely to be any other row. Mr Knyvett have come over from Wickfield—"

"Mr Knyvett!" interrupted Cressingham, glancing as he spoke at Burton. "Do you know what he has come about?"

"Neither the Doctor nor Mr Knyvett thought fit to inform me," said Cobbe, "and therefore I am not at liberty to tell you. But it is time to lock the gate, young gentlemen. Six o'clock has struck."

'Stop a bit, Tom," cried Winburne. "Temple hasn't come

in yet. Don't lock him out. He was only a little behind us. He'll be sure to be here in a minute."

"My duty will allow of my waiting three minutes, Mr Winburne, but not a morsel longer," replied Tom.

"I say, what is to be done?" said Wright, apart to Winburne. "Charlie will get into a tremendous row. The Doctor will be sure if he is late to ask him where he has been, and he'll be obliged to say he has been with Harry Wilder. The Doctor wont like that, because though Charlie isn't absolutely forbidden to see Harry during the half, the Doctor has begged him not to do so, and then—"

"And then Thornton will be asking Charlie what he wanted to see Harry Wilder about, and he'll be obliged to say it was to borrow a pistol of him."

"We don't know that," interrupted Wright.

"We don't *know* it to be sure," returned Winburne, "but it is twenty to one, that is it. Look here, Tom. We left Mr Temple at the end of the second field from this talking to some one. He doesn't know what the time is, or he would have been in before this. I'll just run down to the hedge and shout to him."

"Impossible, Mr Winburne," answered Cobbe. "You appear to forget that I have my duty to perform; and the Doctor will be in the schoolroom in a minute now, if he hasn't gone in already."

He moved towards the gate with the key in his hand. But at that moment there was a scuffle, apparently, among the boys, and Wright reeled back with such force against Cobbe, that they both rolled over on the grass plot. Wright sprang nimbly up again, profusely apologizing to Tom for the tumble

he had caused him, which he declared to be altogether the fault of Warner and Winburne, who had now run into the house.

Tom accepted his apologies with a rueful distrust, born of long experience; but he was not so wasteful of time and word as to offer any remonstrance.

"Give me the key anyhow, Mr Wright," he said. "It is ten minutes past the hour, and the Doctor will be angry."

"The key?" repeated Wright. "Have you lost the key? Who can have got it? One of those fellows must have picked it up, and taken it away inadvertently. Here, Hibbert, just go into the house, and ask Winburne and Warner to look in their pockets. They must have carried it off by mistake!"

"I tell you what, Mr Wright," exclaimed Cobbe, startled out of his measured forms of speech, "if you don't give me the key this minute, I'll go to the Doctor.

Just at this moment Temple made his appearance, not coming along the footpath from Walescliff as they had expected, but issuing from the cover of the trees. He came hurrying along, looking confused and awkward, but evidently relieved to find the gate still unlocked.

"Hooroo," shouted O'Toole, "here's Temple at last—all behind, like the cow's tail! What made ye come that way, man, when we were looking for ye the tither?"

"I came the—the most convenient way," stammered Temple. "I was afraid I was late!"

"And so were we, Charlie," said Wright. "Why, Tom, here's the key, after all, I declare. How in the world could it have found its way into my trousers' pocket!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE HAWLEY EXHIBITION.

THE boys awaited Dr Thornton's arrival with a good deal of interest and some anxiety. The Doctor seldom desired the presence of the whole school, unless some serious offence had been committed, or some important announcement had to be made to them; and there was a good deal of speculation—to quote their favourite mode of expressing themselves—as to "what was up now." There is seldom a time when schoolboys are not conscious of some offence committed; which, if known, would draw down the wrath of their masters. "If you meet a boy, sir," the great Dr Johnson is reported to have said, "if you meet a boy, box his ears; for either he has just done mischief, or he is just going to do it." Most schoolmasters, it is to be feared, would, to a considerable extent, at all events, endorse the Doctor's opinion.

On the present occasion, several gravamina at once occurred to various individuals among the boys present, as being the possible theme of the approaching homily. There was the affair with the pistols, which had come off a week or so previously.

"Do you think any one can have told Thornton, or old

Hepburn, of that match between you and Temple?" asked Taunton. "I suppose old Grimes hasn't told any of the masters of your having borrowed his pistols, has he?"

"It's very unlikely," said Graves. "Grimes is a good-natured old chap, and he must know that Thornton would make a row, if he heard of it. He has seen lots of things of the same kind, and has never reported them."

"And besides," said Dilke, "he'd get into a row himself for having lent the pistols. Thornton is a magistrate, you know, and if he brought the matter before the bench, Grimes might be dismissed from his office. I agree with Stephen, it is most improbable that he has said anything about the pistols."

Again there was the business about the visit of the gipsy, and what had become of her. The quarrel between Captain Gurdon and the senior usher had never been made up. Both the belligerents had been making inquiries in all directions, each being resolved to prove the other wrong. If the constables had lighted on Mother Meggots, she'd be as likely as not to reveal Temple's share in the affair. So reasoned Wright and Winburne, and their coterie.

Apparently Temple himself was possessed with some idea of the kind. He seemed unusually nervous and absent, sometimes not answering questions put to him, sometimes answering them wide of the mark. He twice asked Mr Wilkes for permission to leave the room, and when questioned as to his reason, could only say awkwardly that he wanted to fetch something he had dropped. If the boys had not been so engrossed by their own speculations, his demeanour would have attracted notice.

There was a third conjecture as to the reason why they had been called together, but this was confined to Burton and Cressingham, who were seated in a corner of the room conversing in a subdued tone.

"I say, Clem," said Cressingham, "has that business about the convicts, or sailors, or whatever they were, got to the ears of the masters, do you think? This officer, who has been making inquiries at Curlew, may have found out that the fellows had gone across to Deadman's Point with two of the Doctor's pupils, and has put Thornton up to making inquiries. It will be awkward, wont it, if we are asked?"

"You know what I told them, Fred," returned Burton. "I said I should say nothing unless I was asked, and if I was, should decline to answer."

"Yes, that is what we both agreed to," said Cressingham. "But our refusing to answer will be much the same thing as admitting that we did take those two fellows across, wont it?"

"I suppose it will," said Burton; "but we can't help that. We have given our promise, and we have nothing to do, but to keep to it. Here's the Doctor at last. Well, we shall know the worst now, at all events."

As he spoke the door opened, and the Headmaster, followed by Mr Hepburn and a tall gentleman in black, known to many present as Mr Knyvett, entered the room.

The Doctor's first words set at rest the various anxieties which had troubled his hearers. "I have an announcement to make to you," he said, "of some importance. Mr Hawley, the father of the lady who now owns Hawley Manor, some years ago bequeathed an annuity of one hundred and fifty

pounds a year, to a relative of his, named Thorne, but ordered at the same time that at Mr Thorne's death the money should go to founding an exhibition for one of the senior scholars of this school, at which Mr Hawley himself had been educated. Fifty pounds a year, for three years, was to be given to the pupil who was at the head of the first class, at the close of the winter half-year. Mr Thorne was comparatively a young man, and I never entertained any expectation that the bequest would take effect, so far as this school is concerned, during my lifetime. Mr Knyvett, however, has this evening brought the tidings of Mr Thorne's death after a short illness. He further states that the annuitant had received two of the quarterly payments due for the present year, but Miss Hawley kindly engages to replace these, so that the exhibition may be given entire in the present year. Whoever, therefore, among the first-class boys comes out first in marks at the close of this half-year, will be entitled to the 'Hawley Exhibition,' as it is to be called, of fifty pounds a year for three years. I need not add that I have requested Mr Knyvett to convey to Miss Hawley the thanks of the school generally, as well as my own more particularly, for her great liberality."

He was on the point of withdrawing, when Mr Hepburn stepped forward.

"With your permission, sir," he said, "I should like to put a question to you. It has always been the practice, so long as I can remember the school, in event of any boy receiving what is called a black cross, to strike off one hundred marks from his half-year's total; and in event of his receiving two such marks, to declare him incapable of obtaining any prize at all."

The Doctor bowed. "No doubt, Mr Hepburn," he said, "that has always been the practice."

"Once or twice, if my recollection serves me, it has had a material effect in determining the half-year's prizes."

"I have no doubt you are correct, though I can remember at this moment no particular case. But why do you ask?"

"I wish to know whether this Hawley Exhibition will be liable to the same rule."

"You mean—supposing any one of the first-class boys were to incur the penalty of a black cross to his name, whether a hundred marks would be taken off his list, and whether, supposing him to incur two black crosses, the offender would become incapable of obtaining the Exhibition, whatever his position on the school register might be?"

"That is what I wish to ask, sir."

"Well, the contingency is a very unlikely one to occur, I should hope; but supposing it to occur, I see no reason why the regular custom should be departed from. The penalty ought to be, and no doubt would be exacted."

Mr Hepburn bowed, and soon afterwards the Doctor withdrew, accompanied by Mr Knyvett and Mr Hepburn, who had been invited to supper.

The announcement, so unexpectedly made, produced a great sensation in the school. The contest for the first-class prize always occasioned some interest among the boys, who are wont to feel some concern in everything relating to their seniors; and in the present year the contest between Burton, Graves, and Temple—three boys so unlike one another, and yet each with his special claims to the first place, rendered the struggle more than commonly exciting. The quiet, steady-going set,

of whom Cressingham, Hill, and Lander might be considered as the leaders, maintained that though Clement Burton did not possess the brilliant ability of Temple, or the solid power of Graves, the unvarying soundness of his work made him more than a match for either of his antagonists. When Graves delivered an essay on some historical subject, or Temple a brilliant copy of Greek Iambics, or a clever Latin epigram, and the Doctor bestowing high encomiums on the performances, endorsed them with a number of marks which added formidable numbers to their total on the register, they would remark that Temple and Graves increased their score, only on rare occasions, while Burton was slowly but surely increasing his total every day of the half-year.

It needs not to say that the battle between the three competitors, however much it might, up to the present time, have engaged the attention of the boys, became now a matter of much greater interest in their eyes.

Hitherto the palm had consisted of some handsomely bound book. Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," or Russell's "Modern Europe," or some such work—prizes for which Graves cared nothing, and Temple very little. But such a sum as fifty pounds a year for three years—who was there that would not care for that? The boys broke up into parties of five or six, almost before the Doctor left the room, and were soon busily engaged in discussing the chances of their favourites and the probable issue of the competition. The register of marks, it should be explained, was kept by Mr Hepburn, and, as a rule, kept very carefully. The junior in every class, when the work for the day was over, was required to carry a list of the marks awarded to each boy for that day's lessons and compositions to

the senior usher, and were by him added every evening to the register. Mr Hepburn once in every week summed up each boy's total, but he did not communicate the result to the boys. Therefore though the latter might form a general idea as to whose name stood at the head of the list, they knew nothing with any certainty. Where there was anything like equality between two competitors, they could only form vague conjectures.

In the present half-year, of which only a few weeks had elapsed, one or two of the juniors had taken the trouble to keep a copy of the lists which they had delivered in to Mr Hepburn, and had compared their notes. By these means it had been ascertained, with tolerable accuracy, that Burton was some ten or twelve marks in advance of Temple and Graves, who were very nearly equal, while the fourth, Cressingham, was more than twenty in arrear of these two. So far then the day went with Burton; but both Graves's and Temple's supporters insisted upon it that there would very speedily now be a total change in the order of things. They were able to express their opinions the more freely, because both the last mentioned boys were absent from the schoolroom, and Burton and Cressingham were talking apart in a corner, too far off to hear what the others were saying.

"You'll see Graves go ahead now like a race-horse," said Rawes. "He doesn't care much to get some rotten old book about Greek or Roman antiquities, which would be stuck up in one of the upper shelves of the library at Wilworth; but fifty pounds is another pair of boots altogether. That gun he was so set upon buying, and for which his guardian wouldn't shell out the money—fifty pounds will buy that, and leave a

comfortable sum to be spent in powder and bullets. He won't let this prize slip through his fingers, I'll warrant you. It won't be only an essay now and then, which is a thing he particularly fancies, and for which the Doctor always gives him a pot of marks—it won't be only the essays that he'll shine in. He can do verses as well as Temple, and the regular school-work better than Burton, if he chooses it, and he *will* choose it too. See if he doesn't."

"Will his guardian let him have the money, if he gets the prize?" suggested O'Toole. "My guardian—that's my uncle—*he* wouldn't, the nagur! He'd pay my school-bills with it, and save his own pocket. Didn't my godfather, Phelim O'Casey—didn't he leave me a hundred pounds in his will, and didn't it go to pay some dirty tailor's bills? 'The bills have been standing a long time, Maurice,' says my uncle, 'and the man ought to be paid.' 'Troth and it's a pity ye didn't think of that before,' says I. 'Mr O'Casey left the money to me, and not to Tim O'Shaughnessy, the tailor, nor to you either, uncle Thady, I'm thinking!' But I might as well have talked to the rock of Cashel as to him. Sorra a penny of the hundred pounds ever went into my pocket, and maybe none of the fifty would find its way into Stephen's."

"Oh, old Lumley wouldn't grab Stephen's money, I'll answer for that," said Taunton. "He cuts up rough sometimes about his spending too much money. But what Stephen earned, so to speak, himself, by his own exertions, he'd be safe to let him keep. Lumley's not a bad old fellow at bottom, though he kicks up a row now and then."

Meanwhile equally confident predictions were uttered by Temple's adherents.

"This is a rare stroke of good luck for Charlie," remarked Wright. "It's just the very thing he wanted. I suppose fifty pound is fifty pound to almost everybody,—that is, everybody would like to have it. But it is a different matter to Graves, who will have, they say, ever so many thousands a year, as soon as he comes of age; or to Burton, who, if he hasn't much of his own, anyway, has a rich old aunt, who will leave him all her money some day or other—from what it is to Charlie."

"Ay, I know his mother is poor," said Winburne, "and fifty pounds a-year for three years would be a great haul to him. But there are two things to be considered before we settle that Charlie is to have this money—first, that he will work hard to get it, and secondly, that Burton and Graves won't work hard too."

"Charlie is safe to work for this," said Warner. "He has been doing his best for the last three or four weeks, and he knows this Hawley Exhibition, or whatever it is to be called, is worth getting."

"And as for Burton and Graves," added Wright, "no doubt they are dangerous horses to run against. But Charlie, when he really puts it on, is a match and more for either of them. Burton is one of your steady goers. He makes good running, and keeps it up without flagging. But in composition, which is what tells most on the register of marks, Charlie will now and then shoot ahead of him like lightning; and in a stand-up fight with Stephen Graves, I'd back him of the two, though that would be a much more doubtful affair. But Charlie has a strong reason for working, and Graves hasn't. There's only one thing that is likely to cause him to lose it."

"And what is that, George?" asked Hibbert.

"Charlie's getting into some serious scrapes, and having a 'nigger' stuck on to his name," replied Wright. "We must all do our best to prevent that, and also keep a sharp look out on Rawes and Dilke, and his set. It's not only Hepburn who dislikes Charlie, and would do him a mischief if he could. That fellow, Dick Rawes, hates him. He has some reason to be sure, and he'd have no scruple in playing any dirty trick, that might lose Charlie the day."

"It's a good job that the Doctor and Hepburn were both out of the way when that pistol shooting was going on the other day," remarked Hibbert.

"What, you mean if they had been caught, it would have damaged Charlie's chance."

"It would have done for it altogether," returned Hibbert, "and Graves's too. Hepburn would have stuck a 'nigger' on to their names, as sure as fate. And a hundred marks off a fellow's chalk would be too much for him to make up afterwards, let him work ever so hard."

"I don't quite know that," said Winburne; "but of course the odds must be enormously against his winning."

"I agree with you," said Wright," "and therefore I'm particularly anxious now that the pistol match which was agreed upon between Graves and Temple should not come off to-morrow. I'm sorry I persuaded him to shoot it."

"I don't think you need be afraid of its coming off," said Winburne.

"Why not?" asked Wright. "The fellows who were down on the shore that day, told me it had been positively settled that it was to be shot on Saturday the 19th, at twelve o'clock

—that's to-morrow, you know. And Charlie has quite made up his mind to shoot it."

"Ay, but Graves hasn't got the pistols that he sent for," rejoined Winburne. "I was by when Tom came back from the coach office, at two o'clock to-day. Graves had given him a shilling to fetch a small box which he expected by the night coach. Tom said nothing had come for him yet, but the box might come by the day coach. Graves was properly put out, and refused to be one of the hares in the paper-chase. 'We must manage this somehow,' he says to Taunton, and they walked off together."

"Well, but if the pistols come by the day coach," said Hibbert, "that would do as well."

"No, the day coach never gets in before half-past two in the morning," returned Winburne. "And then the parcels are locked up in the office, and not sent out till the night coach comes in. You may get them by sending, but Graves couldn't send before twelve. I heard Tom tell him plainly he couldn't go on any message before dinner time, if it were ever so. That is what made Graves so savage. As Jerry Taunton remarked. 'Even if the pistols should come by the Eclipse, he couldn't get 'em by twelve o'clock.'"

"He can borrow Grimes's pistols again," said Hibbert, "and take care this time that the bullets fit tight."

"He wont do that," observed Winburne. "He said he wouldn't, and he's a fellow that always sticks to what he says. Well, Wright, I think you may feel pretty secure that this match wont come off; for even if Graves should get his pistols, I'm sure Temple has got nothing to shoot with."

"I thought he intended borrowing a pistol from Harry

Wilder," remarked Hibbert, "and that was what he met Harry for this afternoon."

"I thought so, too," said Winburne. "Didn't he bring it up with him?"

"Well, no, he didn't," said Wright. "Wilder may have agreed to bring it up here, or to Hanger's Cliffs to-morrow, but Charlie didn't bring it in with him. I was by when he came in this evening. I had the curiosity to feel his coat pocket, and there was certainly no pistol in it. But pistol or no pistol, we must try to dissuade him from shooting this match."

"Let's go and talk to him," said Winburne. "We had better try it on to-night. We shall hardly have an opportunity to-morrow."

"Where is Charlie?" inquired Warner. "I haven't seen him since the Doctor left the room."

"Nor I," said Hibbert. "I have been looking for him ever so long."

"Here he is," suddenly exclaimed Wright, as Temple entered the room, closely followed by Cobbe, carrying the Doctor's prayer-book and hassock. "Why, where have you been, Charlie, for the last three-quarters of an hour? Out in the court-yard, hey? Why, it is raining, isn't it?"

"No," replied Temple, "it's not raining, though I think it soon will."

"What is that noise outside?" asked Warner.

"Oh, Mr Knyvett's carriage driving off," said Temple. "He has just said good-night to the Doctor."

"He'll have a wet drive," remarked Wright, looking through the school window. "Charlie is right. The rain will come down before long, and there'll be a storm into the bargain. There's been thunder in the air all day."

Wright's remark was repeated by more than one boy, as he went up to bed. The wind, which had been rising for more than an hour, was now blowing a gale, and threatened to become tenfold more violent before midnight. It howled round the gables and chimneys of the old Priory as though a host of demons had been let loose. The rain still held off, but the threatening aspect of the skies warned the spectators that it would presently burst forth in all likelihood in a perfect deluge. The inmates of the Priory, however, cared little for wind or storm. The massive old walls, built centuries before, possibly to resist a siege, and fully able, before the days of shot and shell, to do so, were proof against the most furious blast that ever blew, and the small leaded window panes, though they gave but scanty light, offered a more solid resistance to the elements than the large squares of modern days. The boys rather enjoyed a storm than otherwise. They found it pleasant to lie in their warm beds and listen to the raving of the wind, and the roaring of the distant sea. Even the flashes of lightning and the crash of thunder did not alarm them much. No one to their knowledge had ever been hurt, and it was picturesque to see the whole landscape, wood, and rock, and sea, suddenly stand out in the broad lurid light, and then disappear as suddenly into darkness.

But though this was the general feeling, there were exceptions to it. "I wish there were curtains to my room," said Cressingham, as they mounted the old oak staircase together, "or, what is still better, shutters as you have. It is very pleasant for some things having this room to myself, but not on a night when there's lightning about. I shan't get a wink of sleep till it's all over."

"Do you mind the lightning?" asked Burton. "I don't in the least. Why, Fred," he added, suddenly, "you had better change rooms with me to-night. You can shut these shutters and draw the curtain over them too, and then you wont see anything of the lightning. I don't usually shut the shutters—except when there is a very bright moon, but they quite keep that out."

Burton, it should be mentioned, occupied, as head of the school, the best of the boys' bedrooms—the one which tradition said had been the sleeping room of the Prior of the Convent. He would have been allowed to have this to himself, but one of the junior boys had been put under his charge that half-year, and his bed had, with Burton's consent, been placed in his room. Little Taylor, a quiet, timid boy, had the same dislike as Cressingham to the lightning, and would probably lie awake for more than half the night, unless the shutters should be closed. The room allotted to Cressingham was a good deal smaller, and was lighted only by a narrow slit in the wall.

The latter caught at his friend's proposal. "I shall be very glad to accept your offer," he said. "I have no doubt I shall sleep as sound as a top in your room. And I suppose no one will object."

"Taylor wont," replied Burton; "he'll be glad to have the shutters fastened. Hepburn might object, I daresay. He might object to anything. We had better say nothing to him, or anyone else, about it, or it might get to his ears. I'll just take my night-gown and hair-brush into your room, and you bring yours into mine. That will be all that we need do."

The change was soon made, and the boys were just on the

point of entering their rooms, when their attention was attracted by voices, which came from the floor below them. One of the speakers was anxious apparently not to be overheard. But in the position in which they chanced to be standing, every word was plainly audible.

"I can't let you out, Mr Temple," said Cobbe. "I didn't want to get you into trouble, or I ought to have told the Doctor of your having been out before prayers in the court-yard. There's nothing he's more particular about; and there was Mr Knyvett's carriage too, waiting about, and his coachman saw you out there, and might tell his master of it, and he'd tell the Doctor."

"I only want to go out for ten minutes, Cobbe," pleaded Temple, "only ten minutes, I assure you. I promise you faithfully to be back in that time."

"I can't do it, sir, it's as much as my place is worth. The Doctor would be very angry if he knew that you hadn't gone to bed. I'll go out myself and fetch anything you may have left out there, if so be that's what you want; though to be sure, if you had left anything out there, you would have brought it in yourself."

"I don't want you to bring anything in, Tom," exclaimed Temple, his excitement growing greater every moment. "I only want to go out for ten minutes. I was prevented just now because Mr Knyvett's servants were standing outside. I tell you I must go out to-night, and I will, and it will be a bad job for any one or anything that tries to stop me."

"Here's Mr Hepburn coming!" exclaimed the school-servant in accents of dismay. "I hear his step. Run for it, Mr Temple, or this here will be a bad job for *you*, I judge."

At this moment, the heavy tread of some one walking along the passage which led from the Doctor's drawing-room to the school precincts, became audible. The next instant, Temple skimmed lightly up the staircase to his bedroom, which corresponded to that of Cressingham at the further end of the gallery; while from below came the clash of the bolts which Tom was drawing.

"A rum go that," whispered Cressingham to his friend. "What can Temple want to go out into the court-yard for at this time of night."

"That is more than I can say, Fred," returned Burton. "I shouldn't fancy the court-yard would be a very pleasant place to go for a walk in to-night. Hark! there comes the rain—a regular downpour, and it will last an hour or two most likely. It will be over one's shoes in mud in another half-hour I expect!"

"In less than that," rejoined Cressingham; "and only listen how the wind is howling. Temple may say he is determined to go out, but I expect he will change his mind now. Rather he than I anyway!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

When the boys met in the schoolroom before prayers on the following morning, all evidences of the storm had disappeared from the sky; which was now as bright and blue as though it had never been darkened by cloud, or had gleamed with lightning. The wind had sunk to a soft summer breeze, and out to sea a long rolling swell was the only remaining trace of the wild commotion of the previous night. But in the court-yard outside the house, there were plain enough indications of the heavy fall of rain, which had lasted with a few intermissions from ten o'clock at night to four or five in the morning. The turf was so soft that the shoes of any one who walked over it sank two inches at least below the surface, and in the roadway there were large pools, which the drains had been insufficient to carry away. The boys exchanged their experiences of the incidents of the night, as they stood in clusters awaiting the arrival of the masters. These, it would appear, were at once various and strange. Some insisted on it that a party of travellers had come about the middle of the night to ask for shelter, others affirmed that there had indeed been midnight visitors, but their object was not shelter but plunder. Others

again were positive that there had been a wreck out at sea. They had distinctly heard minute guns fired; though this last assertion was at last diminished to a confident assurance that one such shot, at all events, had been heard. According to a fourth report, Neptune had been very active during the night, driving off the applicants for shelter, or the would-be robbers, as the case might be.

George Wright was the centre of one of these groups, listening with amused interest to, and passing his comments on, the various statements put forth by his schoolfellows. Temple stood by, leaning against the headmaster's desk. He looked anxious and depressed, and paid little or no heed to the conversation of his schoolfellows. At another part of the room Graves and his following were assembled, not talking about the occurrences of last night, but about a subject which appeared to interest them quite as much.

"You are resolved to shoot this match then, Stephen?" inquired Taunton. "I hardly thought, after all, that it would ever come off."

"I had undertaken to shoot it," answered Graves shortly.

"Yes, but circumstances have considerably altered since then," observed Dilke. "If I don't very much mistake, Temple would be very glad to be off it."

"I make no doubt he would," exclaimed Rawes, "if Stephen would let him. In the first place, now that Stephen has got his pistols from Wilworth ——"

"Temple doesn't know that," remarked Payne. "Why, even we didn't know it till some ten minutes ago, when Stephen said they had arrived, and we don't know how he got them now,"

He glanced somewhat curiously at Graves as he spoke, but Graves made no remark.

"It doesn't signify," said Taunton, "so far as Temple is concerned, whether the pistols have come or not. Temple is not so much afraid of losing the match, as of being caught shooting it; in which case he would lose this Hawley exhibition, or whatever it is to be called."

"What! he makes sure of getting it then, does he?" cried Dilke.

"I don't quite say that," replied Taunton, "but he thinks, no doubt, that if he tries hard, he has a good chance; and that is certainly no more than the fact. But that chance would be of course forfeited if he had a 'black cross,' as he certainly would have for using firearms. I just want to remind you, Steve, of that circumstance too. I suppose, there is no doubt that you would like to gain this exhibition, as much as Temple does."

"Certainly, Jerry," assented Graves. "I should have no objection to fifty pounds a year for three years to help out my allowance at Oxford, not to speak of buying your cousin's gun. I needn't say I have thought of all that. But I choose to set right the mistake that was made about my shooting and Temple's last week. Moreover, when I have said I mean to do a thing, it is my practice to do it, and I'm not going to let a row with the Doctor, or the loss of a prize, or a lot of money either, prevent my doing it. If the match is shot, where I suggested, under Hanger's Cliffs, it will be next to impossible for any one to see us. They are so high and project so far over the sands, that no one from the top could discover what is going on below. The only place we could be seen from

would be out at sea; and if a fellow was put to watch at Cockle Head, he could see any boat coming, and warn us in time. I consider, therefore, there is no risk of detection. But, any way, I mean to shoot the match."

"Bravo, Stephen," exclaimed O'Toole; "ye're the broth of a boy, so ye are. But I judge ye'll not find Charlie Temple as bold as yourself. And it takes two to make a fight, as they say at Ballycooney."

"We had better bring Temple to the point, Stephen," said Dilke. "Let us ask him before Thornton comes in."

"Very well, if you like it, I have no objection," returned Graves.

The party moved up to the spot where Temple and his friends were standing, and Taunton addressed him.

"I suppose, Temple," he said, "you remember that the pistol match between you and Graves was fixed for to-day at twelve o'clock. Nothing has been said about it for the last few days, and therefore we wish to make sure that there is no mistake."

"At a quarter past twelve, Jerry," corrected Dilke. "The fellows could not be down at Hanger's Cliffs before a quarter past twelve."

"A quarter past then," said Taunton. "You will be there, I suppose, Temple, at that time?"

Temple coloured crimson, but he made no answer. Presently Wright spoke for him. "I don't know what Temple may mean to do, but I must say I think things have greatly altered since this match was talked of ——"

"Things altered," repeated Dilke; "you mean, I suppose, that this Hawley prize was not announced then. I don't see ——"

"Nor do I see," broke in Temple, "what you have to do with the matter, Dilke. Graves, it may be true that I am unwilling to shoot the match for reasons of my own ——"

"Reasons of your own!" cried Rawes. "What reasons?"

"It is no concern of yours what my reasons may be," answered Temple hotly. "It is enough that they have nothing whatever to do with this Hawley prize."

"Oh, they have nothing to do with the Hawley prize," repeated Rawes. "Well, then, your change is rather difficult to explain. You borrowed Harry Wilder's pistols only yesterday, you know—"

Temple started. "How do you know that?" he asked hastily.

"I saw them," answered Rawes; "that is, I saw the pistol-case in Wilder's hand, when you went up to speak to him. I suppose you arranged with him to bring them to Hanger's Cliffs at twelve to-day. You don't mean to deny that?"

Temple was silent.

"I see—you can't deny it. Well, what can have happened since six o'clock yesterday evening, to change your mind, except hearing of this Hawley prize?"

Temple still made no answer. His embarrassment was so evident and so distressing, that none of his friends knew how to interfere in his behalf. What he might ultimately have said can only be conjectured; for at this moment the Doctor, who was fully a quarter of an hour behind his time (a most rare circumstance with him), entered the room, and going to the head of the table, knelt down to read prayers. The boys saw in a moment that something unusual had taken place. His manner was constrained and abrupt, a strange

contrast to his ordinary calm and self-possessed demeanour; and his features expressed not only perplexity, but anger. He had no sooner risen from his knees, than he called to the boys and servants assembled to keep their places.

"I have a very strange and unpleasant communication to make to you," he began. "An outrage was committed last night, which will necessitate the most careful inquiry. I don't know whether any of you have been told anything about it." He glanced from face to face as he spoke, but apparently he could read nothing there but surprise, and he went on.

"It would appear that none of you have heard anything, and I must tell you. You will all be as sorry, I think, as I was, to learn that Captain Gurdon's blood-hound, Neptune, was found this morning lying dead on the turf outside the court-yard wall. He had been shot through the heart. Captain Gurdon himself is absent, but I have written to him."

There was a cry of astonishment and distress, followed by a dead silence. Presently the Doctor spoke again. "The discovery was made early this morning by some one who chanced to be walking that way, and he immediately informed both myself and Baines of the fact. Baines and another constable have been making a hasty examination of the spot where this occurred. What they tell me makes matters a good deal worse. They say the act must have been committed by some inmate of this house."

He paused again, hoping that some one would now offer an explanation of the affair. But the boys only looked from one to another with faces of bewilderment and dismay; and he began anew for the third time.

"If the constables are right in their conjecture, and the

person who did this is present in this room, I entreat him to come forward and honestly confess the truth. I shall be willing to hear anything that may be said in explanation or extenuation. It will be far less painful that the offender should be brought to light by his own voluntary admission, than by the agency of the law."

He once more paused, but still no one spoke.

"I am sorry the culprit, whoever he may be," he resumed, "has not the manliness to make an avowal. Well, then, there is nothing for it, but a minute and searching inquiry. Baines and Mr Hepburn are still engaged in their investigations; but I will tell you what is known so far. The dog, it appears, was let loose last night, soon after the storm began. Thunder and lightning cause him to howl so loudly, that he would have disturbed every one's rest. Therefore, Cobbe always untied him when a storm was coming on; when he would hide himself in some dark nook where he could not see the lightning. But Cobbe only let him into the court-yard, and his body was found on the other side of the wall. How did he get out there? There are two gates as you know in the wall. Both are locked regularly every evening at nine o'clock, and the key is brought to me. They were certainly so locked last night. Mr Knyvett's carriage did not drive off till nearly nine. I went out to see him off, and the keys were brought to me before I re-entered the house. I put them in my pocket and took them up into my room, when I went to bed. No one could have got possession of them. The locks have been examined. They have been neither forced nor tampered with. How did the dog get out? The most natural conjecture is that some one has a duplicate key to the

gate, and it must be some one whom the dog knew, or he would have flown at him instantly. This he certainly did not do, or the noise of the struggle must have been heard. Has any one such a key, or can any one, I ask once more, give any explanation of this affair?

"Stop, Fred," whispered Burton, drawing Cressingham back, as he saw he was on the point of saying something. "Think a minute before you speak."

"Surely, Clem, we ought to say what we know," answered Cressingham, in the same guarded tone; "there can't be any reasonable doubt how poor old Neptune got out. He must have followed Temple out through that narrow passage you told me of. You remember what Temple said to Cobbe? He *had been* out and he wanted to go out again, and he *would* go out."

"I remember quite well, but we don't know that he *did* go out again, and Nep could not have followed him out before we went to bed, because he wasn't untied until the lightning began, which was long afterwards."

"We needn't say anything about Temple," returned Cressingham. "We need only tell the Doctor that there is a passage by which poor old Nep could have got out."

"That would make matters no better. Nep must have followed some one out. He couldn't open the trap. Besides that we should have to explain to the Doctor how we discovered the existence of the trap, and that would involve Temple in a tremendous row. I don't say we oughtn't to speak ultimately if it should be found necessary, but you see ——"

"I see that you are a very generous fellow, Clem ——"

"Hush, pray, don't say that," said Burton, in a tone of great distress. "I only want to be just."

"Well, any way I won't say anything now," rejoined Cressingham. "To be sure one could speak at any time, and this matter may be found out in a different way. Ah! and here comes Hepburn, who looks as if he had found out something, and so does old Baines."

The headmaster seemed to be of the same mind. "Have you discovered anything, Mr Hepburn," he said, "that will clear up this mysterious business?"

"Well, sir, we are of opinion that a clue has now been found. Everything, I ought to say, goes to prove that some one from this house was either the direct perpetrator of this act, or was an accomplice in it. There are footprints which show that some one crossed the court-yard after the rain began, and before it had ceased; but the heavy down-pour has washed them out of all shape. There are marks of dirt on the wall of the house in one place, as though some one had scrambled through a window. One bar in this window is found to be loose, so that any one lifting it up, and pushing it on one side, could enter the house through it."

"I am sorry to hear it, Mr Hepburn; and still more sorry to tell you that I have put the question we agreed upon to the boys and servants, and have had no response to it. But you said you had found some clue. Let us hear what it is."

"We have been examining the body of the dog, sir. The bullet with which he was killed went right through the heart, but it isn't anywhere to be found. We further think that there must have been something of a struggle before he was shot. A piece of cloth, a scrap apparently of some one's

trousers, was found in his mouth. Robbins, the school tailor, has now been sent for to examine this. He says it comes from a roll of stuff, which he bought in the spring of last year from a foreign house, and is different, in some respects, from any other roll in his shop. He says that he made several pairs of trousers from it for boys in this school—indeed he has never made trousers from it for any one except them."

"I was afraid so," exclaimed the Doctor, in a tone of great distress. "Boys, will not the offender speak *now?*"

He looked once more appealingly into the faces before him. Many of them expressed astonishment, perplexity, and alarm. Still no one spoke, and he signed to Mr Hepburn to go on.

"By an examination of his books Robbins is able to give a list of those for whom the trousers were made. I have it here. Several of the boys named have left the school. Those remaining are five in number. Cressingham, Darton, Field, Graves, and Temple."

"Let those five boys stand forward," said the Doctor. "Mind," he added, "the questions which I am going to ask you are not put because any one of you in particular is suspected of this outrage, but because the trousers must have belonged to one of you. Cressingham, you are the first in alphabetical order. Did you leave this house at any time last night, and were you in any way concerned in this business?"

"I did not leave the house, sir," said Cressingham, "and was not in any way concerned in it."

"Good. Darton, I ask you the same two questions?"

Darton, a boy in the third class, came forward, looking very

confused and abashed at being brought into notice, but he answered in very nearly the same words which Cressingham had used. So did Field, of whom the inquiry was next made.

"Graves, I see, comes next," observed the Doctor, consulting his list. "I put the same questions to you, Graves?"

Graves made no response.

"Why don't you speak, Graves?" said the headmaster after a pause. "You surely heard me. Did you leave the house last night, and were you in any way concerned in this affair?"

"I would rather not say anything, sir."

"Why not?"

"I don't see why I should be required to answer, sir. Nothing has been alleged that attaches suspicion to me."

"I don't agree with you. There is the same reason for asking you as for asking the others, who have answered plainly enough. I will, however, finish my inquiries before returning to you. Temple, you are the last of the five. What is your reply to my questions?"

"I hope you will excuse my not answering, sir," said Temple.

"Indeed, I cannot excuse it, Temple, or understand it either. Why cannot you two boys, Graves and Temple, why cannot you answer two simple questions, if—as I still hope—you are innocent?"

"I would rather not say anything, sir."

"That is what Graves said! I cannot be satisfied with either of you. A further examination must be made, so far as you two are concerned. Mr Hepburn, will you be good enough to go upstairs, and request Mrs Edwards to compare

carefully the lists of clothes brought here by Graves and Temple, noting particularly whether all the pairs of trousers belonging to them are to be found; and if they are, whether a piece has been torn away from the leg of any one of them. Meanwhile, Bartholomew, do you, with Cobbe's help, search the bureaus belonging to Graves and Temple."

"I protest against my bureau being searched, sir," remonstrated Graves. "I don't think that ought to be done, unless some ground of suspicion can be alleged against me."

"Again, I can't agree with you, Graves. I don't understand what reason you can have for objecting."

"The reason is plain enough, sir," said Baines, holding up a mahogany case, which he had taken from a drawer in the bureau, and opening it. "Here are a brace of pistols, a powder-flask, and a bag of bullets."

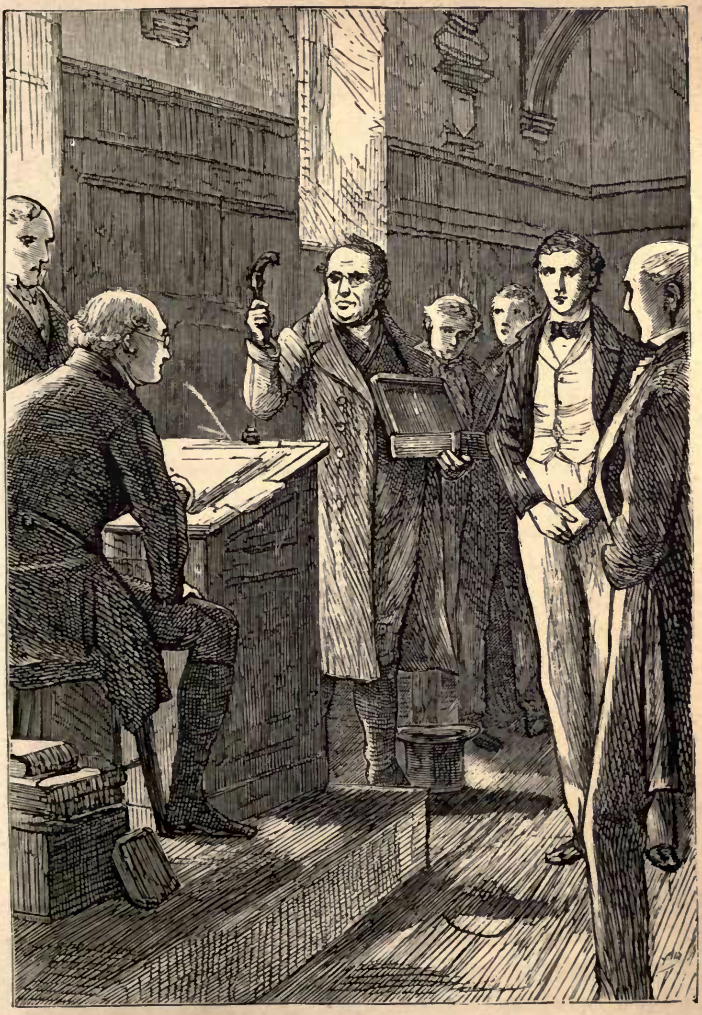
"They have never been used for a long time," exclaimed Taunton. "If you examine them you will find that to be so."

Baines took his pocket-handkerchief, and with the help of the ramrod, thrust it down the barrels of the two pistols, one after another.

"The pistols are clean enough no doubt, sir," he said, presently, "but they might have been fired and cleaned afterwards."

"Well, Graves," said the Doctor, "what have you to say to this? You cannot but be aware that your possession of these pistols is a suspicious circumstance."

"I can't help it, if it is," returned Graves, doggedly. "I don't see why it should be. It doesn't follow because I have a brace of pistols of my own, that I shot a dog with them."



"THE REASON IS PLAIN ENOUGH."

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"Where did you get these pistols from?"

"From home. I bought them of a friend."

"Indeed, I shall send them at once to your guardian, with a letter informing him of what has taken place here. What further may be done in your case is a matter for consideration. Well, Mr Hepburn," he added, as the door opened, and the usher re-entered. "Have Graves's and Temple's clothes been compared with their lists and found correct."

"I am sorry to say not, sir. One pair of Graves's trousers has a piece torn out of the leg; and one pair of Temple's is missing."

Indeed, Graves, what do you say to this?

"I am distrusted, I shall say no more, sir," replied Graves.

"You are most unwise. Temple, what is *your* explanation? Can you produce the missing trousers, or explain what has become of them?"

All eyes were turned upon Temple. His restless uneasiness, so singular a contrast to Graves's dogged coolness, struck every one present. The Doctor had to repeat his question, before he replied. Then he said, "I have lost them."

"Lost them? when, and how?"

"If you please, sir, I would rather not say."

"I am sorry to hear that. You heard me tell Graves just now, that his possession of the pistols, I may add now the condition of his trousers, laid him open to a certain amount of suspicion. The loss of your trousers, I cannot but say, has an equally suspicious appearance."

Temple hung his head, but said nothing.

"Go on with your search, Baines," said the headmaster, "you have not examined Mr Temple's bureau."

"Oh, if you please, sir," cried Temple, "do not search my bureau!"

"Why not, Temple? This is really very strange. One would think that you and Graves had agreed beforehand to make the same answers and requests."

"I would rather not say, sir; but pray, don't!"

"I cannot agree to that. Go on, Baines."

The constable obeyed; and presently from the very bottom of the bureau he drew forth a bundle of clothes; tied up in a large handkerchief. "Ah," he cried, "a lot of clothes! I'll pound it, the trousers are among them! They are not though," he added, a minute or two afterwards as he untied the handkerchief, and took up the contents one after another. "Why, these are women's clothes! Here is a shawl, an old petticoat and gown, and a gipsy's straw bonnet!"

All present stared in amazement at these strange habiliments, which, on a less serious occasion, would have provoked a burst of merriment. Presently Mr Hepburn stepped up and scrutinised them closely. "I am sure I have seen these articles," he said, "and that not very long ago, though I can't think where it was. Stop!" he added a minute afterwards, "it was in the court-yard here, about a fortnight ago. They were worn by that gipsy girl, who escaped, and whom the constables have never been able to find. Yes, I remember the bonnet and that stain on the shawl, as clearly as possible. How did you come in possession of these clothes, Temple?"

"You had better tell the truth, Temple," said the Doctor. "Whatever you may have done, it will be your wisest course to own it."

"I will, sir," said Temple in a low voice. "One day,

about a fortnight ago, I had a dispute with one of the other boys, who knew that I had no money, as to whether I could produce half-a-crown before supper time that evening. It was the day on which Captain Gurdon and Mr Wilkes took the first-class to Hawley Manor. I could think of no other way of getting the money, but that of dressing myself up as a beggar, and persuading Captain Gurdon and the others to give it me. I borrowed a lot of clothes, and met them in Hawley Wood. They were imposed upon, and did give me a lot of silver, believing that I was really a gipsy girl. I returned the money a day or two afterwards dressed in the same disguise. It was then that Mr Hephurn saw me."

"You did a very foolish thing, Temple, and one for which, of course, you must be punished, though the offence is altogether of a different character from the outrage committed last night. From whom did you get these clothes?"

"From an old woman who lives a little way down the lane —Mrs Meggott she is called. I had bought one or two things of her before," answered Temple.

"Do you know the woman of whom Mr Temple speaks, Bartholomew?" said the Doctor, turning to Baines.

"Yes, I know her," returned Baines dryly, "though her acquaintance ain't no credit to nobody. She has taken herself off now—no one knows where. She has been gone yesterday was a week. She was afraid, I judge, of being took before Squire Wolford, or Colonel Wilder, or your reverence, for being concerned in a robbery of some clothes from farmer Wall's drying ground."

"Well, Temple, I am sorry you should have allowed yourself to have any dealings with such a person. But all

this does not explain the loss of your trousers. What have you to say about that?"

Temple coloured painfully, but he said nothing.

"Well, boys," resumed the Doctor, after the pause of a minute or two, "I am sorry this matter has not been cleared up. There are not, to my mind, sufficient grounds for directly charging either Graves or Temple with it, but there are very serious grounds for suspicion against both. I hope they may be proved innocent hereafter. Meanwhile, I must not forget that two things have come incidentally to light in this inquiry, which cannot be passed over—first of all, Graves's breach of the rules in bringing the pistols to school; and secondly, Temple's disguising himself as he confesses to have done, and going out of bounds. These are matters requiring severe notice. Mr Hepburn, you will place a black cross against the names of Graves and Temple. Of course, if it should hereafter be proved that either they or any of their schoolfellows are implicated in the offence committed last night, it will be a much more serious affair. Now, boys, you can go into the playground. This morning has been lost, but we will resume work as usual this afternoon."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE PISTOL.

THE boys left the schoolroom much more quietly than was their ordinary habit, and when they had reached the playground, gathered together in small groups, too deeply interested in the extraordinary matters which had been brought before their notice to set on foot any games. The headmaster retired to his study, buried in thought. Mr Hepburn would have followed, but as he was leaving the deserted schoolroom, Baines touched his arm, and begged him to remain.

Mr Hepburn started. He too had been lost in thought. "What is it, Baines?" he asked.

"I should like a word, private, with you, sir. The Doctor didn't tell the young gentlemen as 'twas you as found the dog—"

"No, we agreed it would be better not to mention it. It would probably put the person who did this on his guard against me."

"Just so, sir. I thought perhaps, too, you might have found the bullet—"

"No, I didn't. But do you think that a matter of much consequence?"

"Well, this finding of pistols in Mr Graves's possession— '

"Mr Graves," repeated the usher quickly. "Do you think, then, that he may have done it?"

"*May* have done it, sir! Why, to be sure he may. I don't know that a man can say at present that 'tis clear who did it; but certainly things look very black so far as he is concerned. What with the tear on his trousers and the pistols in his cupboard, the case is pretty strong. If the bullet should turn up and be found to fit his pistols, he'd hardly get off before a jury. I don't think much of his pistols being clean—pistols is easy cleaned."

"You don't think then that Mr Temple ——"

"Mr Temple, sir? He seems a strange sort of young gentleman, and up to any kind of mischief. And it's odd about his trousers; and, to be sure, he wouldn't say any more than Mr Graves, that he didn't go out last night; but there's no positive evidence against him as there is against t'other. Mayhap they two were out larking together, and they've agreed to keep it dark. Do you know if they are great cronies, Mr Hepburn?"

"Well, no, I believe not," said the usher. "I have reason to believe that they dislike one another. But, of course, it is possible that they may have gone out together for some purpose or other. But if you attach so much weight to finding this bullet, why don't you go out again and make another search for it? I have told you all I knew. I thought there had been a wreck in the bay, and went out very early this morning to the top of the knoll, which commands a view of the sea. The firstt hing I saw, as I crossed the shrubbery, was the body of the dog. I turned it over and saw that it had

been shot through the heart. The ball seemed to have passed through it—indeed there was the mark on both sides of the chest."

"I heard the Doctor say the dog had been shot through the heart, sir; but if so, it couldn't have run any distance. The bullet must be in the ground near the spot where it fell."

"I can't answer for that. But as I said before, if you think the matter to be of importance, why don't you go out and examine the place. I'll go with you."

"I thought the young gentlemen might be about, or I should have asked you to go. Better make the examination as private as possible."

"There is no fear of the boys interrupting you, Baines. They are in the playground, quite out of sight of the shrubbery. There is no fear of anyone interrupting us. We had better go at once."

They went out accordingly. The grounds immediately surrounding Holmwood Priory have been already described. On three sides of the house there was a belt of trees and shrubs. In some places this approached close to the outer wall, hardly allowing a passage under it. At the point of the grounds which was furthest from the sea, nothing could be seen of the surrounding country on account of the density of the foliage.

"This was the spot where I found the body," said Mr Hepburn, pointing to a patch of turf which was still stained with poor Neptune's blood. "You see it is a slight slope. If the bullet passed through the dog's heart, it would go into the ground just about there, and as the ground was very soft, it would penetrate pretty deeply."

"So it would, sir," returned Baines; "but now I see the place, I can perceive that the dog wasn't killed where you found him lying. Look here, sir, at these footmarks. Some one came up through the wood there. There may have been one, or there may have been more. The rains have washed the marks about too much for any one to feel sure about that. But whoever it was—he, or they, came along under that bank up to here. Here it was that the dog made his spring, and he was dragged along, alive or dead, to this place. Look at those scratches in the ground. They were made by his claws, as he was lugged along. There's the place where to look for the bullet. But the ground is so swampy and overgrown with weeds that one might pretty nearly as well look for a needle in a hayloft! Stay, though. What's that, sir?" He pointed, as he spoke, to a spot a few feet off, where something glittering in the sunshine was to be discerned in the midst of a large patch of weeds. "It's not the bullet, sir," he added a moment afterwards, "but it's something more to the purpose. It's a pistol. I'll wager it, this is the one that did the trick!"

"A pistol," repeated Mr Hepburn, "that is important indeed. The first thing, of course, will be to ascertain whether it has recently been discharged."

Baines again took out his pocket handkerchief, and with the help this time of a small twig which he cut, thrust it down the barrel. It came out black with powder. There was no doubt that the pistol had been recently fired.

"Did you ever see this pistol before, sir?" asked Baines, "or can you guess to whom it belongs? I have never seen it, I am sure, nor one like it."

Mr Hepburn took the pistol and turned it carefully over. "It is a valuable pistol I should think," he said, "and of foreign workmanship. Look at those carvings and silver mountings, they have something of an Oriental look about them; and see those letters, can you make them out?"

"Not very plain, sir," said the constable. "There's three of them. The first is an M, I think."

"You are right, Baines. The first is an M, so is the second, and the third is either a C or a G." He took his pocket-handkerchief and rubbed the letters. "Yes, it is a G," he added presently. "They are old English characters; it is certainly a G. 'M.M.G.' Who can that stand for?"

"G, sir? mayn't that be Graves? Do you happen to know what his Christian name is, sir?"

"He has only one Christian name, and that is Stephen," replied the usher.

"But he may have some relation whose Christian name begins with M," urged Baines.

"I don't think he has any relations, blood relations that is, except his sister," said Mr Hepburn. "His father's name I chance to know was the same as his own. Still, however, inquiries should be made about that."

"Of course, sir. Well, the first thing will be to ascertain to whom this pistol belongs, and whether it's owner lent it to any of the Doctor's young gentlemen."

"You feel sure it was fired by one of the young gentlemen?" asked the usher.

"We have gone through that already, sir," returned Baines, a little impatiently. "It is quite certain that some one left the house late last night and returned to it. The footmarks shew that, and the dirt on the window sill. Then the dog

must have been let through the gate, and by some one he knew—he was either let through, or he pushed through after him. The dog couldn't have got here no other way. Then the dog seized some one; the scrap of cloth between his teeth proves that. Well, I should have said myself it wasn't the Holmwood young gent, but the tother as he seized; but if Robbins is right, as I suppose he is, it must have been the Holmwood gent. I suppose the dog was going to seize the tother, when the Holmwood gent interferes—strikes him p'raps—and the dog turns on him. Then comes the question, who fired the shot? It might have been either, but I think 'twas the Holmwood gent. For why? If the pistol belonged to the outsider, to be sure he'd carry it away with him. But if it belonged to one of your young gentlemen he'd be very likely to hide it away, because next day there'd be pretty sure to be a search, and if he took it into the house, it would be found in his possession. I think it's tolerably sure to have been one of Dr Thornton's scollards as did this."

"I am afraid there is only too much likelihood in what you say, Baines, and you think the culprit was, most probably, Mr Graves, do you?"

"Humph. I did think so, sir, a quarter of an hour ago, no doubt, and if the mark 'G' on this pistol stands for Graves, I should think so now. Otherwise the finding this other pistol alters the matter, so far as Mr Graves is concerned. If he did shoot the dog, 'twasn't with the pistols found in his desk, you see. Still there's the torn trousers, and that looks ugly. It seems a pretty equal suspicion now against the two young gentlemen, as wouldn't say they hadn't been out last night."

"For the matter of that," rejoined the usher, "I know that one of them, Mr Temple, *did* go out last night, and was very urgent to be allowed to go out again."

"Indeed, sir," said the constable. "That is important. How do you know that, sir, may I ask?"

"I overheard him speaking to the school servant, Thomas Cobbe," replied Mr Hepburn. "I was just returning from the schoolroom to the headmaster's study, and Cobbe was on the point of locking the door for the night. I heard him say, 'I can't let you out again, Mr Temple. It's as much as my place is worth,' or something of the kind."

"Let you out *again*—are you sure he said that, sir?"

"Yes, I have questioned Cobbe about it this morning. He never likes to say anything against the boys, if he can help it. But he admitted that he had let Temple out, or rather let him in, for he had gone out before the yard door was fastened, and that he wanted to go out a second time, but Cobbe would not allow it."

"What time was it when Cobbe let him in?"

"Just before prayers, I believe, somewhere about half-past eight o'clock."

"That's no good, sir," said the constable. "This was done after the rain began. The foot-marks shew that. The gravel was too dry and hard to have left any mark at all, until the rain came on. But you say he was very anxious to go out again. What could he have wanted to go out for?"

"Well, I have my suspicions about that," replied the usher. "Some time ago, a year or two I think—there was a very serious inquiry on which Colonel Wilder insisted. He found that his son had been playing billiards for money, and it was

thought that all had not been quite fair. It transpired that Temple had been one of the players. It was always a puzzle how he had contrived to go to and from the billiard-room which is in the heart of the town, without being seen by any one. It was suggested that he might have got out at night, but it could not be proved. This, however, looks like it."

"You think he might have wanted to go out to play billiards with young Mr Wilder again," suggested the constable. "But I think that can hardly have been so. I remember the matter of which you speak, and the Colonel asked us to keep an eye on a gentleman, who had been a friend of his son, and had been in the habit of going to this table, and we always have kept our eyes open, so far as that billiard-room is concerned. I am pretty sure that neither young Mr Wilder nor Mr Temple have ever been there since the Colonel spoke to us. Besides, you must remember, sir, that the foot-marks shew, that whoever went out, went to meet some person, and that don't look as though any one was going out merely to play billiards; still, however, the circumstance of Mr Temple's wanting to go out so late, and for no reason, so far as is known—"

"No," said Mr Hepburn. "I overheard him refuse to give Cobbe any reason for his wanting to go out, and Cobbe stated as much to me this morning. But we can send for him and question him if you like it."

"No, sir, best not do that. It would put him on his guard. You see the first thing will be to find out to whom this pistol belongs. We'll first try to make out whether it's an old pistol of Mr Graves's—it may be, you know. He has a lot of money I'm told, and seems to be fond of guns and pistols. We'll send it down to our mates who live near Wilworth—that's

Mr Graves's home. If it's his, some of his guardian's keepers will be sure to know it. Then, if that don't do, I'll take it to Dolman, the gunsmith. He has the handling, at one time or another, of pretty nearly all the guns and pistols in this neighbourhood. If it belongs to any one living near hereabouts, I'll pound it he'll know who it is."

"But you'll not tell any one why you make the inquiry," suggested Mr Hepburn.

"I, sir," said Baines, a little affronted. "I, sir. No. I should think not—that aint our way of going to work. No, we'll be as mute as mice; and if we can't find out anything about it, we'll bring the pistol back to you. By-the-bye, Mr Hepburn, that was a strange business about Mr Temple and the gipsy's clothes, wasn't it? It is no wonder that we couldn't find out what had become of the gipsy! He must be a clever young gentleman that, and an amusing one, too! How the old Captain will laugh, to be sure, when he hears about it."

"Yes," assented Mr Hepburn, stiffly, "that is just one of the things that I am most afraid of. Captain Gurdon has always had a fancy for this boy, Temple; who is clever enough, no doubt, though his cleverness does not improve him in my eyes. I fully expect that the Captain, as soon as he hears of this, will take up the matter in his favour and declare that he has had nothing to do with shooting the dog. Anything he hears, he'll tell Temple, and so put him on his guard."

"That won't do, sir," said Baines, "we had better for the present keep this discovery of the pistol to our two selves. Well, sir, I'm pretty confident we shall get to the bottom of this matter, and that before very long. It will take two or

three days, maybe, to send the pistol over to Wilworth and get an answer; and then it will take some time to get an answer out of Dolman. Some one must leave it there to be cleaned, and see whether Dolman recognises it, or something of that sort. But you may depend upon it I'll bring it back to you as soon as possible. And, meantime, I think we had better stop all further inquiries, and let it seem as though the thing had blown over. That will put the person who did it off his guard. I shan't come up here again, sir, and if I have anything to say to you, I'll send you a line through the post to tell you where to meet me."

"Very good, Baines, if I have anything to tell you, I'll use the same mode of communication. Now, good-bye."

They parted. The constable took the footpath which led through the wood to Walescliff, while Mr Hepburn turned towards the Priory gate. "This boy, Temple, did it, I am convinced," he muttered to himself; "he did it himself, or he was present when it was done. Anyhow, he knows all about it. The only thing is—how to prove it. He has contrived to baffle inquiry so far, and the coincidences of Graves being possessed of a brace of pistols, and the rent in his trousers, have helped him to do so. Well, we must wait—wait and watch. Perhaps Baines may find out the owner of the pistol, though I hardly expect it. If he does not, we must keep a sharp eye on this boy, and not let him know we are watching him. If we could only keep old Gurdon out of the way, I believe we could manage that very well; but I am afraid of his marring everything. And here he comes, I declare," he added a few moments afterwards, as a gig became visible at the further end of the lane, with the well-known figure

of Captain Gurdon seated by the driver. "He has heard of this business, and has come back post haste to inquire about it. Well, he shall not inquire of me, at all events!" He vanished through the gateway, just as the gig turned the corner of the drive.

Meanwhile great excitement prevailed in the playground, which seemed to increase, rather than diminish, the more the question was discussed. Graves, preserving his customary coolness, was the centre of one of the largest and noisiest groups. He had given no explanation to his school-fellows of his refusal to answer the Doctor, and no one had presumed to question him. But this circumstance tended rather to heighten the admiration with which he was regarded. In their secret hearts, most of the boys believed that he was the person who had shot Neptune. He had gone out—so they believed—at an early hour to the coach office, to get his pistols, and was returning with them when Neptune, who notoriously disliked him, met him in the outer yard and sprang upon him. Thereupon Graves, doing exactly what he had said he would do under such circumstances, sent a bullet through the bloodhound's chest, and then, exerting his great strength, pitched the body over the wall. It was a daring feat and just the thing to attract a boy's fancy. The feeling was in no degree lessened by the conviction they entertained, that he would say nothing on the subject to any one, and further, that he would put any one down who tried to get at the truth.

"Never mind, Steve," said Taunton, skilfully avoiding the forbidden question, "they can't take the pistols from you. The Doctor can only send them to Wilworth, and you will have them again at the beginning of the holidays."

"No," said Graves; "and as I didn't want them here, except for the purpose of shooting the match with Temple, that doesn't much signify."

"And the black cross signifies rather less, if possible," observed Rawes. "I don't suppose you care twopence about losing this precious prize of theirs, Stephen, do you?"

"I don't see why I should lose it," answered Graves quietly.

"Not lose it!" exclaimed Rawes in surprise; "why, they will dock you a hundred marks, and you were already behind Burton on the register—were ten marks behind him, I believe—"

"Twelve, one of the juniors told me," interrupted Graves.

"Twelve. Then you are a hundred and twelve behind him now. You don't expect to gain that upon him, do you?"

"I mean to try, anyway," was the answer.

"Bravo! Steve," cried Taunton, "that's your sort! Never say die. You don't choose to be beat. All right! go in and win, I say."

"No, I don't choose to be beat," said Graves. "What's more, I don't choose to submit to injustice. Burton is Hepburn's favourite. He wants him to win, and he knows that for the last fortnight his pet has been losing marks. He has taken advantage of this business to induce the Doctor to strike a hundred marks off my score and Temple's, so as to make Burton safe, as he thinks. I knew he was up to something of the kind, when he asked that question of the Doctor yesterday. He meant to take advantage of the first opportunity of playing this trick, and the opportunity has come sooner than he expected, that's all. But he may find himself

mistaken after all." He walked off, as he spoke, into the schoolroom; and, seating himself at his bureau, began studying the Homer for the next day's lesson.

Meanwhile Temple was sitting alone in a retired corner of the playground, looking very depressed and unhappy. It was so very unusual with him to avoid the society of his schoolfellows, that his demeanour only excited surprise and sympathy.

"He looks terribly down in the mouth, George," said Winburne. "Let us go and comfort him. Anything must be better for him than to sit moping there."

The two boys joined their friend accordingly, who acknowledged their presence by an attempt at a smile, though a very lugubrious one.

"Come, Charlie, old boy, don't be downhearted," began Winburne. "It's a bore certainly that those unlucky clothes were not taken back to Mother Meggots before, or burned. But no one could have foreseen what was going to happen. And the row is over now, at all events."

"And your trousers are sure to be found," added Wright. You didn't like to say where they were; but Baines will soon ferret them out; and then everybody will own—even old Hepburn will have to own—that there is no ground whatever for saying you had anything to do with this business—"

Temple grew as red as fire, and looked so very uncomfortable, that Wright stopped short in the middle of his sentence. "I suppose you *had* nothing to do with it, Charlie?" he resumed almost involuntarily. "You *didn't* go out last night I suppose—"

"I am not going to be questioned by you," broke in Temple, angrily. "It is no business of yours at any rate."

"Of course, it is not, Charlie," rejoined Wright. "I am sure I had no intention of saying anything that could offend you. We'll drop the matter altogether, if you wish it."

"Well, it will be better, George," said Temple, recovering himself. "This is a most unpleasant business, and the less said about it the better. But you mustn't think I care a bit for what Hepburn may choose to say, or think either. I know he dislikes me. He has shown that plain enough, and he is glad of the opportunity of spiting me by depriving me of this prize."

"He hasn't deprived you of it yet," remarked Winburne, "and if I were you, I wouldn't let him deprive me of it at all."

"I wouldn't, I am sure, if I could help it," said Temple, with a faint attempt at a smile; "but what chance is there of my getting it now?"

"A very good one," returned Winburne, "if you will pluck up and work. You know how many marks you got in one week, Charlie—about the middle of last half it was, I remember?"

"What, when there was that copy of Latin verses about the mermaids and the Greek Iambics from Romeo and Juliet?" returned Temple. "Ah! I remember those two subjects happened to suit me exactly. I daresay I got a pot of marks for them, though I don't remember how many."

"Well, I do then, Charlie, anyhow," said Winburne; "you got twenty-five marks—twelve for the Greek Iambics, ten for the Latin poem, and only three for all the rest of your week's work. If you had done all your week's lessons anything like as well as you did the compos, you would have scored six-and-thirty at least. Suppose you scored six-and-thirty a week to

the end of this half—why that would be something like six hundred marks! Burton never gets more than a dozen, or at the most fifteen marks a week—eight or nine for the lessons and four or five for the compos. Why, Charlie, you'd beat his head off—beat him if he had had two hundred added to his score instead of one."

Temple could not forbear a smile. "I must say you are a good fellow to back one up, Jack," he said. "But it is one thing to get twenty-two marks for compos, when the subjects happen to suit one, and another thing to get them every week whether they happen to suit one or not, and then there are those lessons—I certainly might do better with them if I chose it. There is that Livy in particular, and the Memorabilia—if there's one thing I hate more than another it's that book. I am always getting into a row with the Doctor about it. But I suppose I could do that better, and the Livy too, if I were to try."

"You could do it first-chop, Charlie," said Wright, "if you'd only turn to with a will. I must say I should like uncommonly to see you get this prize after all—how it would sell Hepburn to be sure. I'd give five pound if I had it to see his face!"

"Yes, and I shouldn't be sorry for that," said Temple. "But you must remember that even if I were to do all you say, you must not reckon upon others not working double tides too. Burton and Graves might 'turn to with a will' as well as myself."

"I don't believe Burton has got the go in him," said Winburne. "He puts on his best pace as it is, and couldn't go a mile an hour faster if it were ever so. And as for Graves, catch him troubling himself about this prize. Why, he has

more money than he knows what to do with already. What is fifty pound to him, that he is to grind all day for three months and more to get it?"

"Ah! you mustn't reckon upon that, Jack," said Wright. "I heard Dilke and Rawes talking about it a few minutes ago in the playground. They said that Graves thought he hadn't been fairly treated—that they wanted to jockey him out of this prize, and he wasn't going to allow it. He has gone into the school-room to begin work already. But never mind, Charlie, you are not obliged to gain a hundred marks upon *him.* You are two or three ahead of him already. And you know well enough, though Graves is a very different sort of fellow from Burton, he'll never pass you, if you are resolved he shan't."

"And he shan't," exclaimed Temple, clenching his fist. "I thank you two fellows with all my heart. If I don't get this prize after all, any way it shan't be my fault."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A BATHING LESSON.

ABOUT a month had passed since the occurrence related in the last chapter. The interest felt by the boys in the detection of the offender, which for a long time had engrossed their attention, had begun to give way to another subject, which at this time of the year generally absorbed their thoughts. This was the Walescliff regatta, which always took place in the month of September, and was usually a most attractive affair. Its popularity was owing in the first place to the local celebrity of Walescliff, which in remote times had been a place of considerable importance, and although it had been far outstripped both in respect of wealth and population by Haverport, Wickfield, and other contiguous towns, it still retained the prestige of antiquity. Besides this, the harbour was a place especially suitable for a regatta. It has been already cursorily described in a previous chapter, but the reader may wish to have a more minute account of it. It was formed by an estuary of the river Wale, but it differed from most estuaries, in that it was not choked by the sand and mud brought down by the river. It consisted of a very deep chasm in the rocky strata, and all the deposit of the Wale since the days of the Flood had not

been sufficient to fill this up. There was in consequence always deep water, whatever the state of the tide might be, and tolerably large vessels could come up to the landing places at any hour of the day. This rendered the little harbour not only more picturesque, but better suited for rowing and sailing.

It had been the custom for many generations past for the magnates of the county to give prizes to be contended for on the occasion. The Lord Lieutenant presented a silver cup to the winner of the yacht race, which was open to all the county; Sir J. Taunton and Mr Lumley, the Members, a purse of sovereigns to the successful competitors in the six- and four-oared matches; subscriptions were raised to bestow other less costly rewards to the best oarsmen in the double and single sculling contests, the duck hunt, the punting match, and the like. The prize given by the owner of Hawley Manor for many years past had been the same—a douceur of two guineas to the best swimmer, and of one guinea to the best diver.

The Holmwood boys, though always interested spectators of the regatta, and warm partisans of the Walescliff crews, could, of course, take no part in the sailing matches, not being possessed of yachts of their own. They had occasionally, though rarely, competed in the four-oar contest, and a very dim and uncertain tradition affirmed that they had been once victorious in it. But the difficulty of finding among the boys four rowers of sufficiently stalwart proportions to contend successfully with picked men from the large fishing towns of Haverport and Wickfield was so great, that the tradition in question was generally regarded as mythical. But it was a different matter with the swimming and diving prizes. For the first of these they had frequently been successful, and for the

second they had generally proved the victors. Old Gunn regularly every year undertook the training of one or two of the most promising candidates, and was very proud of the number of his pupils who had carried off the palm.

In the present year there was an unusually large number of competitors from the Priory. Temple was generally reputed to be the best swimmer in the school. He had indeed carried off the second prize in the regatta of the previous year, but this time it was generally believed he did not mean to enter for it. Cressingham, Taunton, Wright, Hibbert, O'Toole, and Rawes were to be the school champions in the swimming race, Taunton, O'Toole, and Hibbert being the three essaying for the diving contest also. Of these Cressingham and O'Toole had early secured the services of Old Gunn, and Taunton and Rawes those of his son James. Wright and Hibbert by this arrangement would have been left without an instructor, it being an invariable rule that the Gunns undertook the training of two aspirants only. They would probably have retired from the contest if the circumstance had not reached the ears of old Captain Gurdon, who had a personal liking for Wright, Charlie Temple's intimate friend. He straightway declared his readiness to undertake the training of the two lads, if they were willing to trust themselves to him. As he was at least the equal of either of the boatmen as a swimmer, and as a diver much their superior, it needs not to say that this offer was thankfully accepted, and for the last three weeks Wright and Hibbert had been receiving almost daily lessons to their own great satisfaction, no less than that of their instructor.

The old Captain, indeed, was glad of some occupation to divert his thoughts. He had returned, as the reader has heard,

on the morning of the 19th of August, on receiving Dr Thornton's note informing him of the slaughter of his favourite dog. He had driven up to the house in a state of considerable excitement, and bursting into the room where the Doctor was seated, required in the first place a complete statement of all that was known respecting the affair, and in the second strict justice to be executed on the offenders.

The Headmaster had been prepared for the demand, and proceeded to give his brother-in-law the information he desired. He told him in the first place how and by whom the body of poor Neptune had been found; then of the discovery of the piece of stuff between his teeth; of the rent in Graves's trousers, and the pistols found in his possession; of the refusal of Graves and Temple to say that they had not left the house on the previous evening; and, finally, of the gipsy's clothes found in Temple's possession, and the disappearance of his trousers, adding that no one could doubt that the perpetrator of the act was one of the two boys named—the difficulty was to say which.

The old officer listened to the Doctor's narrative with tolerable patience, only interrupting him every now and then with some exclamation of anger or disgust. But when he heard the last sentence of his remarks he burst out impetuously.

"Temple, Charlie Temple do this!" he exclaimed. "You can't think that, to be sure, Thornton! Why, Charlie was as fond of the dog as I was, and the dog was as fond of him as of me! I wonder you don't see as clear as the day who it was that did this!"

"You mean Graves, I suppose?" returned the headmaster.

"To be sure I do! Why, what doubt can there be? Nep,

poor fellow, seized some one, of course, whom he disliked. There was only one of the boys whom he notoriously disliked, and that was Graves. He was shot with a pistol, and a pistol is found in the possession of one boy only, and that is Graves. He tears some one's trousers, and only one boy's trousers are found to be torn, and that is Graves."

"Those are suspicious circumstances, no doubt, Gurdon. But then Temple, equally with Graves, refuses to say he did not go out last night. Indeed, Mr Hepburn tells me that he knows he did go out—"

"Hepburn! Hepburn has a prejudice against Temple, and is always making charges against the poor lad!"

"Never mind that, Gurdon. He is here only alleging a fact, which he says he can positively prove. Then again, the circumstance, which he himself admits, of having dressed himself up in the gipsy's clothes and begged that money of you in Hawley Wood—"

"What, Charlie Temple was the gipsy girl, was he?" broke in the Captain. "The clever young rascal—ho, ho, ho! What a joke against Hepburn. He shall hear of that! But, however, Doctor, supposing Temple did do what you say, what has that to do with killing poor old Nep?"

"I didn't imply that it had. But it shows how lawless and daring the boy is. Still there is the disappearance of his trousers, of which he gives no explanation—"

"He may really have lost them and not known when or how. I've done the same more than once in my life. You must excuse me, Thornton, but really no unprejudiced person can have any doubt here. I hope you will without more ado take up the matter against Graves."

"Take it up? Have him charged with the offence before the magistrates, do you mean?"

"To be sure. I am sorry for the injury it may do your school—"

"That is not to be thought of for a minute. But we—Baines and all—are agreed that there is not sufficient evidence at present on which to commit any one for trial. It is not known that Graves left the house last night, or this morning. He will not say he did not, but that could not be brought forward. He has pistols, but it is not proved that the bullet with which the dog was shot fits them. The bullet has not been found. His trousers are torn, but the scrap in the dog's mouth has been so mutilated and dragged out of shape that it cannot be fitted to the rent in Graves's trousers. If you could prove that Graves was out with one of his pistols that morning, or find the bullet—"

"I'll do one or the other, if not both, Thornton. My poor old favourite shan't be murdered in this manner, and the brute that did it escape scot-free. I shall say no more about this, Doctor, till I can produce the evidence you require. Then you'll hear again. Good morning!"

He started up, and leaving the house, began straightway to prosecute his inquiries with a vigour which ought speedily to have brought everything to light. For a day or two he flattered himself he was making some progress, but as the time went on, and nothing material was discovered, he began to lose heart, and before the end of the week was glad to divert his thoughts by undertaking, as the reader has heard, the training of the boys for the swimming and diving matches.

One day about the middle of September the conversation

happened to turn on the diving match which had taken place early in the half-year between Taunton and O'Toole, at which the Captain had been present.

"Young Taunton doesn't dive badly," he said. "He has been as well taught, I daresay, as any man who hadn't been in the South Seas could teach him. But if you'll mind what I tell you, Hibbert, he'll have no more chance with you than —than I should have with an alligator!"

"They're first-rate divers, I suppose, sir?" said Hibbert.

"I should think they were. If you had had such an encounter with one as I once had, you would have reason to know the fact."

"When was that, sir?" asked Wright. "Hibbert and I would very much like to hear, if you have no objection to tell us."

"I have no objection," said the Captain, who was fond of telling one of his yarns, when he could get a good listener. "It was in the State of Mississippi, in North America. The alligators grow to a very large size about there—fifteen and sixteen long some of them—with enormous heads. I have measured one that was more than two feet in length, with rows of teeth like large nails. They are about as frightful creatures to look at as can be imagined. They'll get together sometimes in some spot they fancy—the mouth of a river generally, and bellow so loud that you could hear them a mile off and more. But sometimes they'll lie at the bottom of a pond—they like ponds, when they can find them, better than rivers—they'll lie at the bottom as quiet as if they were so many large blocks of stone, for hours together, and all of a moment come up to the surface, shewing their ugly heads and long jaws that would cut

a man in half as easy as a gardener snips off a twig with his shears."

"They don't venture to attack men, do they, sir?" asked Hibbert.

"Don't they, my lad? A good many niggers on the Carolina plantations, and not a few whites too, could tell a different tale. It is said that they always prefer black men's flesh to white, when they have the choice. I don't know how that may be. But they've no objection to breakfast or dine off a white man, that's certain.

"Well, as I said, I had gone over to Mississippi State for a fortnight's run, and my messmate, Murtough M'Grath, had gone over with me. M'Grath was a very good fellow, and though an Irishman, a deal more cautious and thoughtful than I was. That, however, might well be. When I was twenty-two I was as harum-scarum a young blockhead as any one of your schoolfellows, or yourself either, George."

"Thank you for that, sir," said Wright, laughing. "I am glad one of the alligators didn't eat you up, however."

"No, but one nearly did. It was a hot afternoon, you see. In this country we don't in general know what heat means, but out there, one soon learns. We had been tramping all the morning through the woods, and had each of us got a pretty heavy bag, when all of a moment we came upon a small lake, shut in by the trees on every side except one, where there was a border of delicious green turf. We lay down to rest, and eat our tiffin, and then I proposed that we should have a bathe. Murtough warned me that it wasn't safe to venture one's self naked in the water unless one knew the place thoroughly. There were often poisonous snakes hidden in the herbage;

and even in the water itself there were sometimes dangerous vermin. But I wouldn't heed him. I undressed on the top of a flat piece of rock overhanging the pool, and plunged into deep water. It was delicious, and I swam about chaffing Murtough, who was sitting, rifle in hand, on the bank. I had been in about five minutes when I heard a splash behind me, and at the same moment M'Grath called out to me to make for the bank as hard as I could. 'Don't look round,' he shouted, 'but swim for it.' I was too much alarmed to take his advice; indeed I looked round the moment I heard the splash."

"And you saw an alligator's head, I suppose, sir," suggested Hibbert.

"I did, my lad. My blood runs cold at the recollection even now. It was an enormous brute, and his jaws were wide open, shewing his ranges of teeth, which he designed to employ in my service. I caught sight at the same moment of M'Grath, who, like a prudent man, always fired off his rifle before laying it down. The sight suddenly restored my nerve. I saw it was impossible for me now to reach the bank before the brute could catch me. He had fortunately risen up at the very end of the pond, or he would have had me in a jiffey. It was equally plain that Murtough couldn't be in time to stop him with a bullet. There was only one hope for me. I must dive under him. These creatures can turn more quickly in the water than on land, but their great length impede their movements at all times. I turned round and faced him. He was only four or five feet from me, making straight at me. I plunged straight down for two or three feet and then struck out, emerging beyond him about half-way down the pond. He swung himself round more rapidly than I had expected, and

again made at me. M'Grath now gave him a shot; but he had moved his head just at the moment when Murtough fired, and the ball struck his upper jaw, wounding him severely but not mortally. He made a savage plunge forward, and I had to dive again, but I was a good deal exhausted with my exertions, and could hardly force my way through the water. If my friend's second bullet had had no better luck than his first, it would have been all up with me. But his second ball went true enough into the monster's eye, and he was soon struggling in his death agony. I just managed, with Murtough's help, to crawl up the bank."

"That was a near go, sir, indeed," said Hibbert. "What became of your friend, Mr M'Grath?"

"He is in India, but his time is nearly up, and I hear he is coming home immediately. He is a friend of Colonel Wilder's as well as mine, and was staying with him two years ago. He had been invalided and came home for a year. I should think you must remember him."

"I remember seeing a gentleman who was often about with Harry Wilder, sir, tall, with a grey moustache and a slight limp."

"Ay, that was M'Grath. He had a wound five years ago, which makes him limp, and there has been plenty to turn his moustache grey since the days when he shot the alligator. Well, our lesson is over for to-day. We may sit here and rest ourselves awhile. How are things going on up at the Priory? How is the gipsy?"

"Meaning Temple, I suppose," answered Wright, laughing. "I am sure you are very kind, sir, to take that so good-naturedly."

"Well, it would be a very ill-conditioned fellow who would be made angry by a joke like that!" rejoined the old man. "Charlie Temple is a monstrous clever fellow, and a good one, I believe, into the bargain. And he is a famous swimmer too. It is a pity that he has given up practising for this swimming race."

"He is working so hard for this Hawley prize, sir, that he will hardly allow himself time to go out for an hour's walk in the afternoon," said Hibbert. "Indeed, I don't believe he would go out if the Doctor didn't positively insist upon it. The practice for the swimming race would take up at least two hours on an average every day. He told me when I asked him about it that it was quite out of the question his thinking about it."

"Well, the lad is right to work. His family are not well off, are they?"

"No, sir. I believe Mrs Temple is very poor, and it is chiefly on her account that he wants to get this prize. He told me that she didn't know anything about it, and he didn't mean to tell her until it was over. It would make her so very anxious."

"Good lad, good lad," said Gurdon, "that's why he doesn't ever come to see me I suppose, though as he does sometimes take an hour's walk, he might sometimes come my way. Well, I hope he may win the day, I'm sure. How is he getting on?"

"He's getting on capitally," said Wright. "He gets very high marks for his verses and themes every week—sometimes ten for each, and now and then even more, and he hardly ever fails to get two marks for every lesson. That is very good you

know, sir. The Doctor never gives more than three, and very seldom, indeed, more than two. He is going up the register like a sky rocket."

"I am glad to hear it, but how are the others doing? I saw your head usher yesterday, and he told me he didn't think Temple had much chance of winning."

"Ah, he doesn't want him to win, sir," observed Wright. "He dislikes Temple, always has disliked him. Burton is his great favourite, and he still believes that he will come out first at the end of the half-year, instead of third, as everybody else thinks!"

"*Third!* who is to be second then? I know Mr Hepburn expects Burton to be first, but anyway I suppose Charlie would be second."

"We all expect Graves to be second, sir. He is Temple's most dangerous rival. He is working double tides too, and gets such a quantity of marks that it is all Temple can do to keep ahead of him. No one except Mr Hepburn knows exactly how the register stands, but the general notion is that there has hardly been a mark to choose between Graves and Temple since they both began to work so hard about a month ago. But Temple had the lead then, and it is tolerably sure that he has never lost it."

"No," assented Hibbert, "even Graves's party—Dilke and Payne and the others—don't pretend he has gained much as yet on Charlie, if he has gained anything. But they say Graves is safe to keep on with his grind, and Temple will most likely get tired and stop work. But I think they are mistaken."

"I *hope* they are," observed the Captain gravely; "it would

be a great disgrace to the school if the author of that shameful and brutal outrage were to obtain this prize!"

The two boys looked a little embarrassed. The Captain noticed it, and went on.

"Do not the boys themselves believe Graves to be the person who shot poor old Neptune? I thought that was the general opinion."

"A great many think so, sir. George and I and all Temple's friends have always thought so. We know what Graves threatened to do, only a few days before—if Neptune ever sprang on him again—"

"Yes, I know that too," said Captain Gurdon. "Cobbe told me that. He says he heard Graves say it."

"Yes, sir. All the school, pretty nearly, heard him, as well as Cobbe."

"And Cobbe further says he is pretty sure he saw Graves outside the house with his pistols in his hand, early on the morning when the dog was killed," continued the Captain vehemently.

"Indeed, sir," rejoined Wright, looking surprised. "None of the fellows know that, I think. If it could be shown that Graves was out in the yard with a pistol early that morning, I should imagine that would settle the matter."

"So it would, I daresay," rejoined the Captain, "if Cobbe could swear to having seen Graves out that morning. But he only says he thinks so. Look here, my lads. I don't know that I am very wise in talking to you about this. But I get so excited when I think about poor old Neptune, that I can't keep things to myself. And as I have said so much, I had better tell you all. Cobbe told me that Mr Graves sent

him up to the coach office to get these pistols of his on the afternoon before poor Nep's murder, and they weren't come then. Well, somehow or other, Graves had got them by eight or so the next morning. He fancied, he said, Mr Graves had gone down to the coach office himself quite early to fetch them, and that he saw him coming back. His story is, that he was woke by a noise like a scuffle or a fall outside the house. It was very early, hardly daybreak, and Cobbe thought it was a lot of tramps squabbling out in the road. But a minute or two afterwards there came the sound of a pistol shot, and that quite roused him. He got up, and was hurrying on his clothes, when he saw a tall figure carrying a mahogany case, or what looked like one, hurry past his window. He only saw it for a moment, but he fancied it was Mr Graves."

"By Jove," exclaimed Wright, "that does look like it! But, Captain Gurdon, don't they know at the coach office whether Graves went down there that morning to get the pistols?"

"No, he didn't go up there," returned the Captain, "that is one of the strangest features in the business. I asked at the coach office, as soon as I had heard Cobbe's story. Mr Graves didn't fetch the pistols; a boy whom they had never seen before, or since, came for them, and took them away, a few minutes after the coach came in. I got the boy's description and have inquired everywhere, but can learn nothing about him. If ever I do light on the boy, and he can prove that Graves was out that morning, I shall insist on the matter being taken up again. Till then, the closer things are kept the better. I meant not to have said a word about it to any one. But, as I told you just now, when the subject turns

up, I can hardly, I can't hold my tongue. But I hope you boys will be wiser than me, and say nothing."

"We'll say nothing, you may be sure, sir," said Hibbert. "We wont tell even Charlie. Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon, lads." They parted, and the boys strolled leisurely home.

"He's an old brick, the Captain," observed Wright. "Even if I hadn't liked old Nep so much myself, I should have been tremendously sorry for his being killed, because the old fellow feels it so."

"Yes. Nep once saved his life, I've heard," said Hibbert. "He was attacked by robbers, wasn't he?"

"By brigands, I believe, in Sicily," replied Wright. "He had his pistols with him, and he finished one fellow, and wounded another. But there were three left, and they would have been too much for the Captain, when all of a moment, Neptune came bounding up and tore down one fellow, who had just clutched old Gurdon by the throat. The other two cut for it. He told Charlie that it would have been all up with him in two minutes more!"

At this moment the figure of one of the boys was seen issuing from the gate of the Priory, and turning into the path which led to the shrubbery. The next moment it was lost to sight among the trees.

"Wasn't that Charlie?" asked Hibbert. "I only caught a glimpse for a moment, but I thought it was he."

"So it was," answered Wright. "He is just going out for a quarter of an hour before gate-locking to get a mouthful of fresh air, after grinding all the afternoon over Xenophon and Latin verses. He is a most curious fellow is Charlie. It's

not only that he never allows himself more than a quarter of an hour's run at a time, but he never goes anywhere except into the shrubbery, where we saw him going just now. There'd be time to get down to the beach and back, if he took two of his quarters of an hour together, or to the cricket-ground anyway, if he persisted in only taking one. But what he can find in that shrubbery that hits his fancy, I can't imagine."

"Nor I," said Hibbert. "It's the last place I should fancy, especially now when some of the trees are beginning to shed their leaves."

"Well, I hope he'll win," rejoined Wright, "and I fancy he is in a fair way to do so. But I should like to get a sight of the register, I must say that."

"There isn't much chance of your getting your wish," observed Hibbert. "Old Hepburn always keeps the register pretty close, but since this battle between the three seniors has begun, he has kept it closer than ever. But I am of your mind. I'd give something handsome to know how much Charlie has gained on Burton."

"We'll bide our time, and keep a sharp look out," said Wright. "Let Hepburn be ever so careful, he may be caught tripping some day. Two minutes' sight of the register would be quite enough. It will be hard if we cannot manage that."

## CHAPTER XV.

### A SIGHT OF THE REGISTER.

WHILE his school-fellows were speculating as to the meaning of his movements, Temple himself was hurrying through the shrubbery in a very uncomfortable frame of mind. "What can Harry mean by appointing such a time as this for our meeting?" he muttered. "Even if he's punctual, which is more than I expect, we shan't have much more than a quarter of an hour, and I wanted to have a long talk with him."

He proceeded on his way, till he had reached a glade sheltered by the trees on every side, which generally went by the name of the "Gipsy's Hollow." As he entered it young Wilder appeared coming up from the opposite direction.

"Punctual to a moment, Charlie," he said. "You must not be vexed with me for not naming an earlier hour. You will hear my reason presently. I have only just been able to get away as it is."

"Well, never mind that now, Harry," responded Temple, "we had better make the most of the time we have. You said in your note there were several things you wanted to ask me. Let us hear what they are."

"Well, of course, you must know what the first thing

that I have to ask is," said Wilder, "Have you found the pistol?"

"I am sorry to say I have not," returned Temple. "I don't know what to make of it, Harry. I told you, you will remember, that I was obliged to leave it outside the walls. I hid it away where I thought no one could find it. You see I durstn't take it into the house; and, as it proved, it would have been much worse if I had. Thornton had my bureau and Graves's searched; and then it would of course have been discovered, and everything would have come out."

"And you are quite sure, are you, that you looked for it in the place where you had left it?"

"Not only that, but I have searched the whole place for twenty yards round," answered Temple. "I have searched it so often that I wonder I haven't excited suspicion. I don't believe there is a single blade of grass that I haven't turned over! Somebody, of course, must have picked it up; but who that person can be, I can't think. It can't be that Baines or the other constable found it, or they would have brought it out, and tried to discover to whom it belonged. They suspect me as it is, I know, of shooting the dog, and if they could make out—"

"Don't say anything to me about shooting the dog, Charlie," said Harry, hastily, and almost roughly, "I don't want to hear anything of that."

Temple looked annoyed. "I think you are very unkind, Harry," he said. "You see what a difficulty, or rather what danger I am in of detection, and what utter ruin it would be to me, and yet you wont– "

"No, I wont," said the other, sharply. "I want to know

about the pistol, but not about the dog. The less I hear about the dog the better for me, and I should think for you too."

"Very well," returned Temple, angrily. "I wont say any more. And now go on with what you have to say to me."

"What I have to say to you is, in the first place, that I think you must be mistaken in supposing that the constables know nothing about this pistol. You have said so two or three times, but I don't know what makes you say so. They have been making enquiries at all events about some pistol they have found. I don't know that it's the same, of course, as I have not seen it; but they've asked my father, whether he has lost one of his pistols lately, and they have put the same question, I know, to Mr Walton, Mr Carington, and to old Grimes. They've only just left my father. That is what made me so late. I stayed all through their visit, in the hope of seeing the pistol, but they didn't bring it with them."

"Did they describe it?" asked Temple.

"No, they didn't," said Harry. "You see my father denied having lost any pistol at all, so they didn't go into the matter."

"Well, then, it may be only a ruse of theirs—pretending that they had found a pistol, in order to frighten a fellow, you see."

"It is possible, no doubt," said Wilder, rather coldly. "I can't say how that may be. I only tell you what I know. You must do what you yourself think best."

"Very well," said Temple, in an offended tone; "that, I suppose, is all you have to say to me, and it's quite as well, since it must now be getting near the time for locking up."

"I am sorry to say it is *not* all I have to say to you," said

Harry Wilder. "There's something a good deal worse. My father has had a letter from Colonel M'Grath this morning, telling him he is on the point of setting out for England. He may be expected in England in the course of a few weeks—certainly before Christmas, and probably a month before it."

"Oh, Harry, you don't mean that, to be sure!" exclaimed Temple, in a tone of the greatest alarm. "If he should arrive before this pistol is found, whatever will become of me."

"It would be very awkward no doubt," said his companion in a kinder tone. "Look here, Charlie, if there's nothing more in this matter, than that you asked me to lend you a pistol, merely for your amusement, and I lent you one, which Colonel M'Grath left in my charge—why there wouldn't be any great harm in that, even if the pistol was lost. I'd take the blame upon myself, if that were all. But then you see, there is this matter of the dog—"

"You, yourself, requested just now that nothing might be said about that," interrupted Temple.

"I don't want to say anything about it. I only want you to consider, Temple, whether it wouldn't be better for you to go to Thornton, or my father, if you like, and tell him everything. You may feel sure that I shall say nothing, but if I were in your place—"

"No, no, Harry. I can't do it! Perhaps I ought, but I can't! I shall never forgive myself for my haste and folly. I can't bear to look old Gurdon in the face! No. I can't do what you propose—not yet, at all events. Please don't ask me to do it." He paused a moment, and then added.

"You told me just now that Colonel M'Grath intended to return to England shortly—did he say by what ship he meant

to come, or name the day on which he was to leave India?"

"He did not, he only said he was coming soon."

"Soon—well it's now September. Perhaps he mayn't after all be here before Christmas."

"Perhaps not," said Wilder. "I should think it was quite a chance. But I don't see that that makes much difference."

"Yes, but it would; it would make the greatest difference. You see before then the pistol may be found. Some one must have got it, and they might be induced to give it up, if a reward was offered them—a large reward you know."

"Perhaps," said the other, "but are you prepared to offer a large reward?"

"I couldn't now of course," answered Temple, "but I might be able to do so before—before very long. But just tell me one thing, Harry. What sort of fellow is this Colonel M'Grath?"

"Well, he's a very good sort of fellow, Temple. My father thinks very highly of him. He'd have no patience with any thing underhand. He was a great friend of Captain Gurdon's too."

Temples cheek flushed angrily.

"You have no right to speak to me in that way," he cried. "I shall wish you good evening, I suppose I may assume that you are not going to say anything about this matter without first giving me notice of it."

"I gave you my promise that I would not," answered Wilder, coldly, "and when I give a promise I keep it. But I warned you at the same time if I should be questioned about it, I should say nothing but what was true."

"Nobody ever asked you to do anything else," retorted Temple, with equal coldness. He turned away, and walked off towards the house.

Harry Wilder looked after him with a wistful expression on his face. "It is a pity he does not speak out," he said, half aloud. "If he shot the dog in self-defence, or by accident, and would only say so, I think every one would forgive him. But he has no business to allow suspicion to rest upon any one else; and there is one fellow, at all events, I am told, who is suspected of having done the act, even more than Charlie himself is. Well, I shall keep to my promise; say nothing unless asked; say the truth, if I am."

Meanwhile Charlie Temple hurried as fast as he could to the gate, and was fortunate enough to gain admission, notwithstanding that the proper time for locking up had passed. He went straight to his study, and locked himself in. Then, taking out a letter, the postmark of which showed it had been received only that morning, he read it carefully through. It ran as follows:—

WEST STREET, EDBURNE.

MY DEAR CHARLIE,—I have this morning received a reply from your uncle, which has been a long time coming. I believe he has been away from Malaga for some time, though he does not say so. He is, in general, punctual enough in answering letters. Perhaps he has been unwilling to answer this letter; indeed, I wish he had been longer in answering it. If he had taken more time for reflection, I think he would not have written so harshly. He will not hear of your going to the University—that is, he will do nothing towards helping you to go there. He says he does not see what would be the

good of such a proceeding, as you have no intention of going into orders. He had engaged, he says, to pay your schooling up to Christmas next. By that time you ought to be fit to go into any business—take a clerk's place in a bank or a mercantile house; and if you have not availed yourself of your opportunities, that must be entirely your own fault. As for his own house, if you can produce a good character from your headmaster, and are a tolerable French scholar, and can pass an examination in arithmetic and book-keeping, he will give you a trial. If he should feel satisfied with you, he will "do something more for you." By that I suppose he means, take you into partnership. Indeed, if he should be pleased with you, there is no reason why he should not do this. He has never been married, and, at his time of life, he is not likely to marry; he has no relative so near as yourself, and he was very fond of your father.

This offer is all we could wish for you, my dear boy; but, then, there is the difficulty of the knowledge of French and book-keeping. You told me, I think, when I asked you, that you had never been taught either the one or the other at Holmwood, and certainly you cannot have learnt them anywhere else. I mentioned this in a letter to your uncle, and asked whether he would continue his allowance to you for one year more, in order that you might qualify yourself in these two particulars. I am sorry to say that this request seems to have vexed him. You know how suspicious he is apt to be of people trying to encroach upon his kindness, and, unluckily, he has this idea in his mind very strongly, as far as you are concerned. If he came to know you as you now are, Charlie, he would soon change his opinion on this point. But the

misfortune is that he not only does not know you, but has conceived a very unjust and very unfavourable opinion respecting you. It would be no use, I fear, attempting to alter his determination on this head. Therefore, so far as I can see, I am afraid you must give up all hope of help from your uncle. It would take at least a year to teach you enough French, as well as arithmetic and book-keeping, to satisfy your uncle's requirements. Mr Hawkin, the actuary, who did a great deal of business for your father, and who is always willing to help us, would undertake to teach you the book-keeping. His charges would be very small, if anything, and you could not have a better teacher; and there is a French gentleman, a Buonapartist, who has lately settled in Edburne, and gives lessons in French. His charges are five shillings a lesson. I have consulted him on the subject. He tells me that you ought to have at least four lessons a week for at least a twelvemonth, and he could not conscientiously undertake to teach you to speak French fluently under that time, however hard you might work. Then there would be your living at home, and the expenses of your outfit and voyage to Malaga; for your uncle positively refuses to do anything more for you until you present yourself—as I wish with all my heart there was any chance of your doing—properly qualified, in his counting-house. Altogether it would cost more than a hundred pounds—probably a hundred and fifty. And you know, my boy, we might as well try, in our present circumstances, to raise a hundred and fifty thousand pounds as a hundred and fifty. It must all be given up, I am afraid. Mr Wilde, who keeps the grammar school here, will take you as one of his junior ushers. It is only forty pounds a year, and the work

altogether beneath your abilities; and possibly, Mr Hall, the banker, might give you a junior clerkship; but even there you would have to prepare yourself by some months' study, at the least, and I do not know how even that could be afforded. I fear Mr Wilde's situation is the only one open to you, and, sorry as I am to have to send you such information, I have no alternative but to do so. Winifred joins with me in love and regrets.—Your affectionate mother, SELINA TEMPLE.

Temple read this long letter twice through before he laid it down.

"It's like a fatality," he muttered. "That appointment is the very thing I have always fancied, and it would be the making of me, and would relieve my mother and sister from all their troubles. I had quite given up the hope of it when this Hawley prize comes all of a sudden, utterly unexpected, utterly beyond all expectation; and I should certainly have had it if it hadn't been for my own stupid folly. I don't care twopence what that brute Dilke or that still greater brute Rawes, may choose to say or think, and yet, rather than let them crow over me, I got myself first into that scrape about dressing myself up as a gipsy, and all but lost the chance of getting the exhibition, and then a second time into this still more serious mess, which, if it should become known—and I am afraid there is only too much likelihood that it will—must needs floor me altogether! What a fool I have been, to be sure! Well, anyway it is a lesson which I shall not forget in a hurry!

"But how am I to get out of it? Shall I, after all, take Harry's advice that he gave me just now, and go and tell the whole to Thornton? No, no, no, it won't do! My uncle

requires 'a good character from my master.' Old Thornton will say he can't give me one if he knows all that has passed. He'll say his conscience won't let him, and people would blame him if he did, and that I didn't deserve it. Well, I suppose I don't; and if I only were concerned in this business, I think I would speak out, and let Graves or Burton have the scholarship—little as it matters to them, while it is all in all to me. But there's my mother and my sister. They would be punished much more than I should, and surely they don't deserve to suffer.

"No, I must hold on; and, after all, I think Harry Wilder makes out the matter to be worse than it is. Let him say what he will, I doubt the constables having got possession of that pistol, and I don't understand how they could have got hold of it. Cobbe told me they did not come up to the house till nearly seven o'clock, and I was out fully twenty minutes before seven, hunting everywhere. No; some tramp has picked it up, and is waiting for a reward to be offered. Then this Colonel M'Grath—if he comes home before the Hawley is settled, and takes up the matter against me, I am utterly done. Well, as I've said before, he may not come before Christmas, and he may consent to keep my secret. Anyhow, there is no use in fretting about this."

He took out his books and sat resolutely down to prepare his Xenophon lesson for the next day, deaf to repeated raps at his door, and entreaties to be admitted. It was not until he had quite finished his task, having read all that half-a-dozen commentators had to say, having followed out the dialectic variations of every unusual word, and having fully satisfied himself as to every geographical and historical allu-

sion which occurred anywhere in the lesson, that he desisted. He would then have taken the Latin theme for the week in hand, but that he found it was too near supper-time for this to be of any use. He put away his books therefore, and unlocking his door, strolled into the school-room, where he was instantly fastened on by George Wright and Jack Winburne.

"We've been looking for you ever so long, old man," said Winburne. "Your study was locked, and I suppose you were inside, as you weren't to be found anywhere else. But if so, you were 'deafer than the rocks of Icarus'—wherever they may happen to be, of which we heard in the Horace this morning."

"I have need to be deaf, Jack," returned Temple, "if you are to thunder after that fashion at my door. It is of no use, I have already told you; I don't mean to let you and George into my study again till this Hawley prize has been decided."

"Well, you are right, Charlie," said Wright, "and we must content ourselves with such scraps of your society as you are pleased to give us. But we thought you would like to hear what we had to tell you, even if it did withdraw your attention from Greek particles and Iambics for ten minutes."

"If you've anything pleasant to tell me, let me hear it now," said Temple. "It will be very acceptable. I haven't heard anything pleasant for a long time now."

"Well, we've two pieces of information to give you," returned Wright. "In the first place Tom Hibbert and I have been down with old Gurdon, practising for the Regatta, you know. And we had a long confab with the old Captain. You would be pleased if you had heard what he said about you?"

"I know he is a jolly good fellow," said Temple, with a sigh, "and has been very kind—much kinder than I deserve!"

"Yes, but for the last few weeks, you know, he has said very little about you. We thought"—he added quickly, as he noticed the expression of Temple's face—"we thought that was because you hadn't been to see him. But to-day he did speak of you again, and very kindly. He is fully convinced that the person who killed poor old Nep was Graves. He has got a lot of evidence together, he says, which proves quite plainly ——"

"I wish you would say nothing at all on that subject," broke in Temple. "I thought I had already asked you, as a personal favour to me, to say nothing about it. But if I haven't done so, I ask you now."

"Certainly, I will say nothing if you dislike it. I only fancied you would be glad to know that Captain Gurdon didn't believe what Hepburn ——"

"Hepburn be hanged," broke out Temple in a fit of anger, which was very unusual with him. "I know he hates me! I know he would do anything to spite me! I don't care a pin what *he* may say!"

"Nor do I, Charlie. Well, let us change the subject. Weren't you wishing the other day that you knew how you and Burton and Graves stood in the register of marks? We were wishing it only this very afternoon."

"Yes, I did say so, George. I *should* like very much to know. I have my idea about it, but after all, it is only a fancy. But I suppose there is very little chance of my getting my wish."

"Quite contrary, Charlie. There's every chance of your getting it. What do you think happened only yesterday?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," replied Temple smiling.

"Why, you remember Hepburn losing the key of his desk —on that day, you know, when there was that row, and Baines was up here?"

Temple's colour shewed that he understood the reference, but he only bent his head.

"Well, Hepburn was in such a state of excitement that he hardly knew what he was about. He was bustling here and there all the afternoon. He forgot to call for the day's marks at the usual time; and if it hadn't been that he remembered the two black crosses to be put to your name and Graves's, I believe he wouldn't have thought about the marks at all till the next day. But just before prayers he recollected that, and felt in his pocket for his key. It wasn't to be found. He searched his pockets, and went up to his bedroom to look there, and then into the Doctor's study and the visitors' room, where he had been talking with Baines; and he made the fellows search every corner of the schoolroom, and sent down a message to the constable's house to inquire whether Baines had taken it away by mistake. But it was no go. The key couldn't be found; and the next morning Crew, the locksmith, was sent for to make a new key, which Hepburn has used ever since."

"I do remember hearing something about it at the time," said Temple. "But I had forgotten it. Well, what then?"

"Why, it seems that yesterday afternoon, Rawes and Dilke found this key. They found it in a very strange place— in Graves's bedroom."

"In Graves's bedroom?" repeated Temple. "How had he got hold of it?"

"I asked that question, Charlie. But no, Graves knew nothing about it. It was lying in a corner, between his box and the wall."

"How in the world could it have got there?"

"Well, easily enough," answered Wright. "If you remember, Hepburn was sent by the Doctor to examine the boxes belonging to both you and Graves. He had the key in his waistcoat pocket, no doubt. He told us, as I recollect quite well, that he always carried it there. No doubt he was leaning over Graves's box, and the key fell out between it and the wall. It might never have been discovered, if the sun hadn't been streaming in through the window, and fell on the key."

"And how do they know it is Hepburn's key?" asked Temple. "They didn't show it to Hepburn, I suppose?"

"No, I should think not, Charlie," said Winburne laughing. "They are not the sort of fellows to do that! They made sure of the fact in a very simple manner. They went down to the schoolroom last night, when all the fellows were in bed, and tried it. It opened the desk, sure enough."

"And what do they mean to do now?" inquired Temple. "Do they mean to give it to Hepburn, or throw it into the sea, or what? I suppose they don't mean to keep possession of it unknown to Hepburn."

"Well, Rawes and Dilke are noways particular, and I don't think they would have scrupled to keep it in order that they might open Hepburn's desk, whenever it might be convenient to them to do so. But they told Taunton about it this morning, and he told Graves."

"What did Graves say?"

"He said he wouldn't have it. Dilke must either give it back to Hepburn, or destroy it. It had been found in his room, he said, and he must either see it restored to its owner or broken to pieces."

"Quite right too," said Temple. "I'm glad he said that. What did Dilke do?"

"He didn't like it, but he durstn't refuse to do anything that Graves told him to do. So he got the big coal-hammer and knocked it to pieces. But that isn't what I wanted to speak to you about. Last night, when those fellows went down to Hepburn's desk, they saw the Register of Marks and looked at it, so Taunton told me. He said he had seen the list of marks they had copied. He couldn't remember quite accurately. But he said if I wanted to know the numbers, he would get the list again from Dilke and copy it down. I thought you might like to know exactly how you stood at present."

"Well, I should, George," replied Temple. "If it is known in the school, there is no reason why I shouldn't know it."

On the following morning he found a slip of paper lying on the desk in his study, with the following written on it.

STATE OF THE REGISTER OF MARKS.

*Saturday, Aug.* 12.

| | |
|---|---|
| Burton, | 118 |
| Temple, | 109 |
| Graves, | 106 |

*Saturday, Aug.* 19.

| | |
|---|---|
| Burton, | 144 |
| Temple, | 37 |
| Graves, | 35 |

*Saturday, Sept.* 15.

| | |
|---|---|
| Burton, - - - - - - - - | 248 |
| Temple, - - - - - - - - | 166 |
| Graves, - - - - - - - - | 163 |

"Eighty-two still behind Burton," he muttered. "Twenty-five gained in four weeks, and there are thirteen to come. Well, it is possible, and therefore worth trying."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE REGATTA.

Of all the public spectacles exhibited for the amusement of the English people, there is none more lively and spirited than a regatta. It requires, of course—to be perfect—fine weather; which is a difficult thing to reckon upon in this English climate. But even in this respect it has the advantage over all other out-door displays. Wet, over head or under foot, render an archery meeting impossible. A cricket match is so sorely marred by moist and slippery turf, as to be shorn of all its glory. People will go to a fair or a horse race in any weather; but then it is business generally, and not pleasure, that takes them there. Nothing can be more forlorn than the spectacle of marquees and booths soaked through with wet, the flags draggled and drooping overhead, the ground a quagmire under foot. Two or three hours of heavy rain destroy for the entire day the charm of the spectacle. But so long as the rain is not actually falling at the time when the contest is going on, it does not much injure a regatta. The crews, who have been sitting comfortably under cover, turn out with unimpaired spirits; the boats look all the fresher for the washing they have received; the race-course itself is as good as ever. In the instance of the Walescliff Regatta even the booths and

standing-places were wont to suffer little damage from the elements. The hard, shingly shore was as dry in a quarter of an hour, as if no rain had fallen there for weeks; the large boats in which most of the visitors arrived, and the grand stand, which was run up with poles and rough planks, were impervious to weather. Thus, though it had happened that the morning of the regatta had been to all appearance hopelessly wet, yet before twelve o'clock everything looked fresh and brilliant—all the more so, in fact, for the heavy rain of the last twelve hours.

Throughout the forenoon visitors from the neighbouring towns made their appearance—most of them by sea, in large fishing boats, or colliers hired or lent for the occasion. All were gaily decorated with flags, and many of them had bands of music on board; and gaily dressed ladies added lightness and animation to the scene. From inland the gentry came in their carriages, the farmers in their tax-carts, or it might be in large tilted waggons, conveying the whole of the family, house-servants and all, for a day's pleasuring. It was, as the reader has been told, the occasion of a great county gathering, and when the day proved fine, there was no prettier sight to be seen anywhere.

"Have you got the list of races, James?" asked Cressingham of young Gunn, as he, Burton, Hill, and Lander entered the old fisherman's cottage about half-past ten o'clock, just after the cessation of the rain. "It is going to be a splendid day after all. Look out to windward there. It is as blue and clear as a fellow could wish."

"All right, sir," said James. "I knew we were going to have a fine day as soon as I saw the sky this morning. Here's

the list. My father is to be starter and Captain Gurdon judge. They'll want some of you young gentlemen to row in the umpire's boat, if you'll be so good as to take an oar. The coast-guard lieutenant has lent us his light eight-oared cutter and two of his best men; and there's Dick Waters and Phil Hawkins, who are only in for the sailing match; they'll row in all the matches but that, and I am the stroke oar. But we shall want three more, and they must be pretty good hands. I thought if you and Mr Cressingham, and either Mr Graves or Mr Temple——"

"Neither Mr Graves nor Mr Temple will be at the regatta," said Lander. "I heard Temple himself say he didn't mean to come, and Jerry Taunton was telling us the same about Graves. They never will come out at all now, except when they are obliged, and the doctor wouldn't oblige them to come to this if they didn't like it."

"Of course not," observed Burton. "But Mr Cressingham and myself will be willing to row if you can get an eighth any where. There are none in the school, I am afraid, who would do."

"No, sir. Well, we must ask Bill Wigram, I suppose. He has entered for only one race—the swimming race, you know; and as Mr Cressingham, who is to take part in that too, is willing to row, I don't suppose he will refuse."

"That is settled, then," said Burton. "Now let us look at the list of the races, James. There are a good lot of them, apparently."

"Yes, sir," replied Gunn; "and a good many will be good races. First, there's the trial heats for four-oared boats. There are only our own men in them, and the outsiders won't care

much about them; nor we either, very particularly, because Hawkins's crew is sure to win. Then comes the yacht race; that will be a pretty sight. There's a lot of sweet, pretty boats entered for that. Mr Carington's *Red Rover*, and Mr Walton's *Columbine*, and Lord Wandesborough's *Intrepid*, and the *Topaz*, belonging to some gentleman at Haverport, and Squire Wolford's *Waterloo*, and one or two more that I can't remember now. Most of 'em came into the harbour yesterday, and the others this morning. With this wind there'll be a beautiful race. It will be the finest sight of the day."

"Well, we shall all want Squire Wolford to win," said Hill. "He is a favourite with us."

"So he is with every one in these parts, sir. Well, then, there comes the trials for the eight-oared boats; that's the race everybody cares most about. There's six boats entered—*Curlew*, *Haverport*, *Horncombe*, *Loggington*, *Walescliff*, and *Wickfield*. There'll be a tough tussle or two before that's settled. The pairs are all drawn. *Loggington* and *Walescliff* come first."

"*Walescliff* will win that, wont it?" asked Lander.

"So they say, sir. I haven't seen *Loggington* row; but I'm told they are no great things. Then come *Curlew* and *Horncombe*. That will be a hollow thing. But *Wickfield* and *Haverport* will have a pretty tough battle, I expect. I couldn't name the winner, nor could any one else, I expect."

"What comes after that?" asked Hill.

"Why, after that comes your swimming race, Mr Hill. I expect there'll be good sport for that too. There's eight in for that—six of you Holmwood gentlemen and two of our chaps—Joe Raikes and Bill Wigram."

"Are they dabs at it, James?" asked Burton.

"Joe's no good," said Gunn; "but t'other man's a tough customer. I never saw a fellow swim much faster. But Captain Gurdon, he saw him swimming one day, and he said his man would collar him, for all his strength and pluck. If he'd been properly taught, he said, he'd have been too much for his pupil; but as 'twas, he felt pretty sure Bill would lose the day."

"I hope he may be right, I'm sure," said Hill. "Well, after the heats for the swimming race, I suppose comes the diving match?"

"Yes, sir, and then they stop an hour for dinner. After dinner there's the final race for the four-oars, then the duck hunt, then the race between the two winners of the swimming race, and last of all, the final race between the eight-oars."

At this moment a loud cheer was heard, and an eight-oared boat was seen rounding the lighthouse rock and rowing leisurely into the harbour.

"What is that?" asked Cressingham.

"That," replied Gunn, looking out of the window; "Oh! that's the *Wickfield* boat at last. I suppose the rain kept them. Yes, there they are. There's young Mr Knyvett steering, and Tom and Bill Bowles rowing stroke and number five. First-rate oars they are, and their boat will feel 'em. We beat the *Wickfield* last year by a boat's length. But it is as like as not, these two Bowles's having come home, will make all the difference."

"Bowles," repeated Cressingham. "Did you say the name of the fellow rowing stroke in that boat was called Bowles? and the one at number five too—his name is Bowles, is it?

Why, Clem, don't you remember that day last August? Aren't these fellows the same? Why, they can't have been deserters, to be sure?"

"Didn't you hear about that, sir?" asked Gunn. "There's been such a talk about that business, I thought every one had heard it."

"What business?" asked Cressingham.

"About the two Bowles's, sir. They're most respectable men. Nobody more respected in Wickfield. They're the owners as well as captain and first mate of the *Caroline*, a fine brig trading for coals between Wickfield and Newcastle. They'd gone to Portsmouth to hire a few more hands, when they were set upon by a press-gang, and carried straight aboard the *Enterprise*, which was lying off Curlew, ready to sail the next day to Algiers. They told the first lieutenant who they were; but he'd been earwigged by somebody—it ain't at present known quite clearly by whom. They cut up rough, and he had 'em put in irons. But they managed to get clear somehow, and went back to Wickfield. Some people say they swam the whole way, but I don't see that's possible."

"Well," said Cressingham, "what happened when they got to Wickfield?"

"Oh, they went straight to lawyer Knyvett, and he wrote up to London about it. An officer was sent down to inquire into the matter—I daresay you remember his coming."

"Yes, to be sure," said Hill; "he went over from here to Curlew in the *Betsy Jane*. How did he settle the matter?"

"He said the Bowles's papers were all right, and their empressment was against the law, and the first lieutenant of the *Enterprise* would have to answer for his refusal to listen to

their story, when he came home. But as the poor gentleman was killed in the bombardment of Algiers, I suppose that will come to nothing."

"Wasn't anything done to the officer of the press-gang?" asked Burton.

"Well, it seemed that he had been misled by a man named Carr, a fellow who had been a crimp and a money lender, and I don't know what, in Portsmouth. But he'd run away and couldn't be found. So it ended in the Bowles's being let go free, and an apology and some compensation made them."

"Do you know at what inn here they put up?" inquired Burton.

"At the Anchor, sir, I believe. But if you are going to row in the umpire's boat, it's time you changed your clothes. The four-oars will start in a quarter of an hour now."

Half-an-hour afterwards the harbour presented a really beautiful spectacle. Though the air was fresh the day was deliciously warm and bright. Even the ladies made no demur to accompanying their male relatives and friends on the water. Light boats, rowing some two, some four oars, with spectators sitting in their sterns, gleamed up and down the course. The headmaster's family filled one large galley, his two sons, Mr Wilkes, and Mr M'Donald taking the oars, while the Doctor himself managed the steering lines. Colonel Wilder, Mr Carington of Horncombe, Mr Walton, the Vicar of Walescliff, and many others occupied boats of larger or smaller size, while along the shore a line of carriages and other humbler vehicles was drawn up, enabling such spectators as were unwilling to venture on the water to obtain a good view of the sport.

Presently the umpire's boat, with Burton and Cressingham

among the rowers, and Captain Gurdon sitting beside the steersman, put off, the four-oared boats took their places, and the signal for the start was given.

James Gunn's predictions were more nearly verified than such predictions are wont to be. The races between the four-oars attracted but little notice. The yacht race was at once a spirited contest, and a highly attractive spectacle. In the first eight-oar heat between Loggington and Walescliff the superiority of the latter was too evident from the first to cause much interest to be felt. The same was the case with the second struggle between Curlew and Horncombe, in which the former rowed in easy victors by several lengths. The third, however, proved a complete contrast to the former two. For more than two-thirds of the course the Wickfield and Haverport crews were almost oar and oar, and it was only in the last few hundred yards that the determined pluck of the Wickfield men, and especially of their gallant stroke, landed them the winners by little more than a single boat's length.

The cheers of the partisans of Wickfield had hardly died out when a throng of spectators, among whom the Holmwood boys were especially conspicuous, were seen moving down towards a flag-staff erected about a quarter of a mile from the grand stand. This was the starting point for the swimming races, the great event of the day in the estimation of the boys. There were to be two heats, and four competitors in each heat. The names of the eight entered for the prize were written on slips of paper and thrown into a hat, from which they were picked out by James Gunn, who had been blindfolded for the occasion. It was found that the first batch was to consist of Cressingham—who, together with Wigram, had landed to take

their parts in the struggle, leaving the umpire's boat with six rowers only—Taunton, O'Toole, and Bill Wigram, and the second of Hibbert, Wright, Hill, and Joe Raikes.

"All the best swimmers are in the first lot," remarked old Gunn *sotto voce* to Captain Grimes, as they proceeded to the starting place followed by a crowd of boys. "Whoever wins the first heat is pretty safe to win the prize."

"Well, I don't know that, John," returned the Captain in the same tone. "All the four in the first heat are good swimmers, and three of 'em very good, and in the second lot three of 'em isn't worth very much, I grant you that. But the fourth—he that Captain Gurdon has been training, Wright his name is—is as good a hand as I've seen for many a year past. I seen him last Friday going over the course with the Captain following him in a boat. I've never seen anything prettier than the way he skimmed through the water, just under the surface and no more. Maybe he wont win, but it will be a good swimmer that beats him. What I want to see is how the day will go betwixt Will Wigram and these young Priory chaps. I've never seen them swimming together. Will is ever so much stronger than they are—I haven't often set eyes on a finer young chap. But he don't swim in very good form. His legs are too low in the water, and his shoulders too high. I am curious to see 'em matched."

"You'll soon have your wish, Cap'en," said Gunn. "They seem to be all but ready now. Young gentlemen," he continued, raising his voice, "you understand, I suppose, how this start is managed. Bill Mullins in the punt there takes hold of one end of this chain, and I keep a grip on the other. You four—each of you just touches the chain with one hand, till I

give the word. Then we let the chain drop, and you goes off as fast as you can."

"We understand well enough, old boy," said Taunton, who, conspicuous in his red cap and tightly-fitting red drawers, had contrived to job himself into the place nearest the shore, where he knew that the stream did not run so strongly as somewhat further out. "We know all about it. It doesn't require to be a Solomon to understand how it is managed. Just sheer a little further off, my hearty," he continued, addressing Wigram, who occupied the next place to him. "We are hardly clear of one another, and if we foul we shall simply spoil our own game."

"Don't ye come too near me either," exclaimed O'Toole, who appeared equipped with green drawers and swimming cap, the colour being a compliment, as he expressed it, to the Emerald Island. "Ay, that will do, man. We couldn't be better than that. James, ye villain, why don't ye give the word? How long am I to be kept here like a fish dangling on to a night line?"

"I'm quite ready, Mr O'Toole, if the others are. Now then, gentlemen, one, two, three, off!"

Both men dropped the chain as he spoke, and the four swimmers instantly struck out with all their force. It was some little time before they were fairly away, and then it was seen that the contest was likely to be a severe one. O'Toole had fallen a yard or so behind, and was struggling with all his strength to regain his position. Cressingham and Taunton were leading, as nearly abreast as possible, and Wigram was a foot or two behind. In this order they reached the buoy moored in front of Grimes's cottage, and passing round it,

commenced the swim homewards, having now the tide against them. But by the time when they were fairly started on their return, it had become plain to all that the palm of victory would fall to either Cressingham or Wigram.

O'Toole had never recovered his first loss of distance, and the violence of his exertions soon exhausted him. He was now fully twenty yards behind, and though he continued with unabated courage to struggle on, it was evident that he had not the slightest chance of success.

Taunton had kept even with Cressingham, a few feet in advance of Wigram, until the buoy was reached. But he did not manœuvre the turn as skilfully as his adversaries, losing two or three yards before he was fairly at work again. The spectators presently became aware that he was unable to regain his place, and he gradually fell further astern.

Cressingham and Wigram both contrived to clear the buoy quickly and skilfully, the former still keeping a lead of a few feet. But they were now swimming against tide, and Wigram's strength began to tell. He reduced the distance between himself and his antagonist slowly but surely. The latter strove gallantly to maintain his position, and for two-thirds of the remaining distance was still slightly in advance. But at this point of the race, even the Holmwood boys were obliged to admit to themselves that unless some accident should occur, the young fisherman must of necessity go ahead. The excitement grew every moment more intense. The swimmers were still a hundred yards from the grand stand, when the shouts of the delighted Walescliffites announced that their man was at last fairly ahead, and was gradually widening the interval between himself and his rival. Two

minutes more and they passed the winning post, Wigram having a lead of two or three feet.

The vexation of the boys at this result was all the greater in proportion to its having been, almost to the last moment, unexpected. For years past the swimming race had been won by some champion from Holmwood, and the boys had come to look upon it as a thing belonging almost exclusively to themselves. Once or twice competitors from the town had entered for it, but it was considered rather a saucy thing for them to do, and anyway the interlopers had always hitherto been ignominiously defeated. This year, more particularly when two or three of their number had been declared by old Gunn to be more than ordinarily good swimmers, it was most annoying. To be sure it was some comfort that in the second heat, not only Wright, but Hibbert and Hill also, had fairly distanced the Walescliff champion, while Wright had outstripped his two school-fellows, apparently without exertion. But then the race had taken half a minute longer to swim than had been the case in the previous heat, and that did not look as though Wright was likely to win the day against the redoubted Wigram. The boys clustered together on the shore, too full of their subject to take much note of even the diving match, which was won easily enough by Hibbert, who did due credit to Captain Gurdon's training, satisfying even his somewhat severe requirements. At the three o'clock dinner, the final contest between Wright and Wigram occupied almost exclusively the conversation of the boys.

"I'm afraid the snobs will have it their own way," observed Taunton to Hill, who was sitting next him. "That fellow Wigram is a perfect Hercules for muscle, and can hold out

any time apparently. I don't suppose there is much difference between Cressingham and Wright. The only time, I believe, that they ever swam against one another—at the regatta last year—Cressingham came in before him."

"That's true," answered Hill; "but they say Wright has improved immensely this last month, and old Gurdon, his trainer, says he is safe to win. Certainly he went ahead of all of us easily enough. And, I think, Wigram must be afraid of him. He has refused to row any more in the umpire's boat, for fear of tiring himself before the race. Harry Wilder has agreed to take his place."

"That looks well," said Taunton; "and I should certainly be sorry if the cup, which has stood on a bracket in the dining hall for I don't know how many years, should be carried off, to be exhibited, it may be, in the tap-room at the Anchor. But, I say, where is Burton?"

"He is down there, close to the door," returned Hill. "He came in very late. I think I saw him going to the Anchor, as soon as the crew of the umpire's boat had landed. Well, dinner is over now. What is the first race to come off now?"

"The final heat for the four-oars," said Hill, "then the duck hunt, then the match between Wright and Wigram, and lastly, the decisive race between the winners of the eight-oar heats, Curlew, Wickfield, and Walescliff."

"I don't care for anything till the swimming race," said Taunton. "The last heat between the eight will be worth seeing. But I am tired of the duck hunt, and the four-oars too."

The boys in general seemed to share his opinion. They hardly troubled themselves to leave the room where they

had dined to see the four-oar contest, and looked rather listlessly on while the duck hunt was in progress, notwithstanding that in former years it had been a great source of amusement to them, and this year the hunt was unusually good. But when it was concluded, and the bell rung for the decisive heat of the swimming race, a very different state of things ensued. Wright was followed down to the starting place by nearly half the school, and when he and his burly antagonist had taken their places, and the signal for starting was given, there were no bounds to their eagerness. They ran shouting at the top of their voices along the shore, prophesying every moment that their champion would go ahead, or imploring him to make greater exertions for the honour of the school; while the sailors and fishermen on their side were almost as clamorous. But for a long time neither party seemed to gain advantage. The tartan cap, which was Wright's distinguishing badge, moved on in almost exactly the same line with the rough bare locks of his antagonist. They reached the buoy almost at the same moment, and swung lightly round it without advantage to either. As the last quarter of a mile of the course was against the tide, it was now generally thought that the palm would fall to Wigram. But to the boys' unbounded delight, the return course had no sooner been entered on than Wright began gradually, and to all appearance easily, to move away from his opponent. Wigram exerted his great strength to the utmost; but it speedily became evident, in vain. Lightly, and without apparent effort, the Holmwood champion glided along, increasing with every minute the length of his lead, until he passed the judge's chair, at least twenty yards in advance of his rival,

"THE HOLMWOOD CHAMPION GLIDED ALONG."

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The boys were now in a state of the utmost satisfaction. Not only had the honour of the school been fully maintained, but a most unexpected and glorious victory had been won; and cheer after cheer testified their exultation. They were now in a frame of mind to watch with interest what the spectators generally regarded as the most important contest of the day—the final encounter between the three successful eight-oars, Curlew, Wickfield, and Walescliff. This was indeed a most doubtful matter. All three crews consisted of strong and practised oarsmen. Curlew was thought to be slightly inferior to the two others, while these were regarded as so nearly matched, that it was thought the victory would depend on the choice of stations. Nor were these anticipations without foundation. Unluckily the toss was won by Wickfield, who took their place under the shelter of the high cliffs which guarded the harbour, while Walescliff had to breast the full force of the stream. After maintaining a most gallant struggle, oar and oar with their adversaries for two-thirds of the distance, the Walescliff champions were at last left in the rear, and rowed in about a boat's length astern of the victors, the Curlew boat following several lengths behind.

The victors stepped ashore to receive the congratulations of their friends, and the umpires' boat almost at the same moment came alongside the landing-place. Then Burton sprang out and hurried up to the steersman of the winning crew, whom he tapped on the shoulder.

"Frank," he whispered in his ear, "I have been trying to come to speak with you all day, but I couldn't catch you. I want so much to have a talk with you."

"I have been looking after *you*, Burton; but I could not

get away till the race was over. Come into this booth here. It is quite empty. I suppose you want to inquire about George?"

"Yes," responded Burton, "have you any letter for me? He is afraid, I know, to write directly to me, because his handwriting might be recognised, and the post-mark shew where he is. But he promised to write under cover to you."

"I am sorry to say I have no letter for you. I have heard —heard only this morning. But his letter is about his own affairs. He only tells me to remember him most kindly to you."

"He makes no answer to my request?" asked Burton.

"He does not notice it. I think he cannot have had your letters, though I forwarded them immediately, or perhaps one of his letters to me may have miscarried."

"It puts me into a most awkward fix," said Burton. "I really do not know what to do. You are sure of George's address now, are you?"

"I know, of course, where he writes from, but he will make no stay there. He gives me the address, however, to which I am now to write. If you have any message to send, I will take charge of it. I shall write as soon as I get home."

"Very well, Frank. If you will come up with me to the Anchor I will write a few lines for you to enclose, and please the moment you hear anything from him, let me know it."

"I promise you most faithfully I will, Clement. Let us go up to the Anchor at once."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE FOOTBALL MATCH.

Six or seven more weeks had passed. The autumn was fast passing into winter, and the Holmwood boys had long since begun their football season. Nothing of any consequence had taken place since the day of the regatta. Captain Gurdon had never been able to discover anything to substantiate the charge which he was anxious to make against Stephen Graves; nor, to all appearance, had the constables succeeded in throwing any light on the mystery of poor Neptune's death. The boys were beginning to believe that they had heard the last of the matter, and it was gradually ceasing to form a topic of conversation among themselves. The competition for the Hawley prize, however, seemed to excite the greatest interest. The reader is aware that almost to the day of the regatta, although Temple and Graves had both of them gained considerably upon Burton, the distance between him and them was so great, that there appeared but little prospect of their overtaking him. The discovery made by Wright and Winburne as to the state of the register up to that date, had somehow or other transpired in the school, though it was not known how the discovery had been made, and the general

impression in consequence was that Burton would win after all. But from the day of the regatta there was a marked change in the aspect of things. Burton had up to that time been doing his school work, if not brilliantly, at least tolerably well. Temple and Graves might gain seven or eight marks upon him in the course of the week, but never more, and on an average not so much. But after the day of the regatta a change had seemed to come over him. His compositions, which had always been good, and sometimes merited a higher epithet, became so mediocre as to obtain very few marks, and his lessons fell off in the same manner. His two adversaries, who continued to exert themselves as determinedly as ever, were now plainly and rapidly diminishing the distance between them and him. Once more the opinion began to grow up in the school, that in the long run he would be found to be number three, instead of number one. Doctor Thornton appeared to be as much surprised as anybody at the turn which things were taking. Mr Hepburn, who was not only perplexed but a good deal annoyed, once or twice said a few words to Burton on the subject, but the boy received them in a manner, which made it difficult for him to say anything further.

The masters, however, were not the only persons who saw the progress of things with dissatisfaction. One day, late in November, Cressingham came to the resolution of remonstrating seriously with his friend. The two boys had always, to some extent, been friends, and since Alford's departure, a close intimacy had grown up between them. If Burton would listen to an appeal from any one, it would be from Cressingham. Aware of this, Hill and Lander had requested Fred to speak

to Burton in behalf of them all, and Dr Thornton himself had also hinted as much a day or two before. Cressingham felt that the present day would be a suitable one for carrying out his purpose. There was to be a football match between the Holmwood boys and those belonging to a large school at Haverport. Neither Cressingham nor Burton were to play. The latter had excused himself on the simple grounds that he would rather not take part in the match, and Cressingham had hurt his hand a few days previously, which precluded him from playing. The match was to take place in the cricket field, and the two boys had taken their places in the balcony, in front of the cricket pavilion—a place which none but first class boys were allowed to enter. As all the other seniors were engaged in the match, the two friends had the balcony to themselves, and could talk without interruption from any.

It was a bright, clear November day. The Haverport lads, eighteen in number, who had come over in an old stage coach, hired for the occasion, made their appearance a little after ten o'clock in the morning, and the play was to begin about eleven. Various reports of their prowess, size, and strength had reached Walescliff, and roused the spirit of the school to a greater pitch than ordinary. A football match in those days was not the elaborate and artistic affair which it has been made in recent times. It consisted, in fact, in little more than in marshalling two hosts, supposed to be equally endowed with skill and strength, in an enclosed ground, with a goal at either end, throwing a football into the midst befbre them, and allowing them to kick it hither and thither as they pleased. The minute and stringent rules, originating with one public school or another, and formed into a regular system by football asso-

ciations, had in those days no existence. "Scrimmages" and "hots," "back players," and "bull-dogs," and "skirmishes," "dribbling" and "touching," were things as yet undreamed of. If the ball was kicked, no matter how, beyond the goal of the one party, it was scored as a victory for the other. Then it was brought back, placed in the middle of the ground again, and the contest was renewed as before. There was less artistic skill, no doubt; but it may be a question whether there was not just as good fun as in the present day.

At all events, neither the Holmwood nor the Haverport team thought that any code of laws was necessary to their enjoyment. By eleven o'clock they were all stripped to their jerseys, trousers, and highlows; these, with a handkerchief tied round the waist, constituting the whole of their football toilet. The combatants were drawn up in two long lines, equidistant from the central point of the field in which the ball had been placed, some three or four minutes before the hour of eleven. As soon as the minute-hand reached the figure of twelve on the umpire's watch, he shouted aloud, "Play," and the whole thirty-six players swept simultaneously down on the ball.

The play at first was tolerably even. Both parties consisted of schoolboys of seventeen and eighteen, in the very prime and flower of their years—active, inaccessible to fatigue, and inexhaustible in energy, as seventeen and eighteen alone can be. The ball flew hither and thither, driven a few feet in one direction and then driven back again; now flying over the heads of the one party, and anon caught and sent spinning through the air in the opposite direction; sometimes buried under a heap of players, who had tumbled over one another like clowns in a circus, and then exhumed by some nimble-footed cham-

pion, who would carry it before him for a few yards until he was tripped up by another as nimble, to fall prostrate on mother earth, and arise again one mass of muck and mud, but in nowise daunted.

Burton and Cressingham stood awhile looking on in silence; but neither of them was absorbed by the interest of the game. Burton's thoughts apparently were far away, as had been generally the case with him for some weeks past; and Cressingham was thinking how he might best introduce the subject which he had resolved to broach with Burton. At length his attention was attracted by a loud shout of "Graves! Graves!" "bravo, Stephen!" He looked, and perceived that his schoolfellow had contrived to force his way through the throng of his opponents, carrying the ball before him, and overthrowing champion after champion of the Haverports, until he had fairly forced it through the Haverport goal, and one was scored to his side in consequence.

"Graves is playing well to-day, Clem," he remarked; "better, I think, than Charlie Temple, who is generally thought to be our best player. They are two strange fellows those, Clem."

"Graves and Temple," repeated Burton, absently. "Yes. they are both of them clever fellows. They seem to be able to do pretty well anything they like."

"I don't know about that, Clem. I think they are allowed sometimes to do things, because other fellows don't prevent them, who might if they liked,—things which, to my mind, they oughtn't to be allowed to do!"

"As what, Fred?" asked Burton, turning short round on his companion. "I am not sure that I understand you."

"I think you must, Clem. One of the things they are doing is getting before you in the register of marks. I don't think they ought to be allowed to do that!"

"Who allows them?" asked Burton, his brown cheek glowing crimson as he spoke.

"Well, Clem, don't be angry if I speak the truth. You are allowing them, and they couldn't do it if you did not allow them."

At this moment their attention was attracted by a loud shout from the spectators. One of the Haverport players—a tall, powerful fellow—had succeeded in forcing the ball away through a knot of his opponents, who were gathered about it, and driving it by straight kicks to the Holmwood end of the field. First Rawes and then Lander had thrown themselves in his way, but had failed to stop him—the former being thrown on one side, and the other laid flat on the field. The victorious champion still continued his course, amid the vociferous applause of his partisans. The Holmwood players rushed after him in vain. Graves was too far behind to render any help. There was no one between the Haverport player and the Holmwood goal except Temple, and he was too light a weight to encounter such an antagonist with any success. All hope of averting the disaster seemed lost. But Temple's extraordinary lightness of foot enabled him to reach the ball a second or so before his rival, and to drive it by a side kick out of the other's reach, when it was caught by some of the Holmwood players, and kicked back again.

Burton and Cressingham looked on while this was passing, too much interested to continue their conversation until it was over. Burton would fain have taken the opportunity

or letting it drop altogether, but Cressingham was resolved to persist.

"To go on with what I was saying, Clem. You asked who it was that allowed Temple and Graves to go ahead of you in the register of marks. I repeat there is only one person that allows it, and that is yourself. I add, there is also only one person who could prevent it, and that person also is yourself."

"What makes you think that?" asked his school-fellow, doggedly.

"What makes me think it?" rejoined Cressingham. "Why, my own common sense. Look here. You and I, Clem, have gone through the school together. We have been in the same class for four years past. I never knew you all that time fail to get a heap of marks every week for your school work. But ever since this Hawley prize was announced, you have been falling off. For the first three or four weeks you did get something like your former average, while these fellows got at least twice the amount they had been getting before—"

"Surely I have nothing to do with the number of marks which Graves and Temple get," interrupted Burton.

"Of course I know that, Clem; and if you had done as well as you usually did, I shouldn't at all have wondered at their gaining on you. They are, both of them, extremely clever fellows, and they have been working in a manner they never did before, ever since the day when notice was given of this Hawley prize. I am certainly surprised at the determined manner in which they have persisted in their work, but it has been all plain sailing so far as they are concerned. It is of you and your doings that I speak."

He paused, but his friend was silent, and he went on. "I can of course guess your motive. You think it is all important to them—to one of them, that is—to get this prize, and you are resolved to let him get it, so far, that is, as you are concerned. Can you, yourself, deny that is the simple explanation of your failure?"

Burton was still silent. His companion after looking sometime wistfully in his face, began once more. "It's very generous, Clem, it's like you. But I think you oughtn't to do it. All of us, all your friends, think you oughtn't. In the first place, it isn't fair to yourself. You mean to go to the University, don't you?"

"I believe my aunt means to send me there," said Burton.

"Just so, and I have often heard you say that you didn't like being dependent on your aunt, and you wished you could do something for yourself—at least, I think I've heard you say so."

He looked interrogatively at his friend.

"Yes, Fred," said Burton, reluctantly, "I have no doubt you have often heard me say so. It is certainly the fact."

"Well, then, why should you prefer these two fellows, Graves and Temple—why should you prefer them to your aunt in this way? Why sacrifice your aunt, not to say yourself, to them? What claim can they have upon you, like that of your own nearest relative? Why are you to miss the prize, which everybody knows ought to be yours? And besides that, neither of these fellows deserve any consideration at your hands. If there had been a good fellow, like Hill, in the way, whom every one would like to help; or a poor fellow like Lander, whose father, it is well known, can't pay his son's

school bills, and who is allowed by the Doctor to stay here out of sheer kindness, it might be a different thing. But here's this fellow Graves rolling in riches. It is well known that he only wants to gain this Hawley prize in order to buy a new gun with the money. And here again is Temple—"

He was again interrupted by a louder cry than before from the field. Haverport had been getting the best of it for some time past, and had kicked one or two goals in advance of their opponents. But the Holmwood players had made a determined attempt to stem the current of misfortune, and had so far succeeded that they had carried the ball into the middle of the ground again, where a desperate encounter was going on. Hickson, the tall Haverport champion—of whom mention has been made—on the one side, and Stephen Graves on the other, had rushed up to the rescue, and met in the centre of the field with a force which threw them both backwards, so sorely shaken that they were unable for the moment to rise, while Charlie Temple, skilfully catching the ball with his foot, as it flew on one side, drove it onward with a series of kicks until it was driven past the Haverport goal, and one was scored by his side. "Bravo, Temple," "Well done, Temple," was the cry of the delighted boys.

"Bravo, Temple, say I," continued Cressingham. "He is as clever as good tempered, and as amusing a fellow as ever came to Holmwood! But he doesn't deserve that you should give up your right and neglect your work for him, not to speak of injuring your relatives and disappointing your friends. I know his circumstances are altogether different from those of Graves. I don't suppose his case is as bad as Geoff. Lander's, but no doubt he really wants the Hawley money. But he

oughtn't to have it. Even if he were fairly at the top of the register he oughtn't to have it."

"Why not, Fred?" inquired Burton.

"Why not? you know why not—because he killed poor old Nep."

"Who knows that he did that?" rejoined Burton. "That has never been proved. The charge has been dropped because it couldn't be proved."

"It has never been proved, Clem, chiefly because you and I have never told what we knew. But if we had, do you think there could have been much doubt on the subject? If it had been known that, not only did he want to go out that night—for some reason that has never been explained—but that he, and he only, knew of that secret passage by which a fellow could get out at night after the gates had been locked, wouldn't the thing soon have been made clear then? I don't say it would have been proof enough in itself sufficient to convict him, but it would have set Baines on his track, and he would soon have followed it out."

"You are convinced then, Fred, that Temple did it?" said Burton.

"Yes, Clem," returned Cressingham, "and so are you in your heart. See here—every one knows that Temple was determined to shoot that match with Graves; many fellows further know that he had asked Harry Wilder, the day before the match—the very day on which Nep was killed, to lend him a pistol. Harry Wilder, with the pistol-case in his hand, was seen talking to him just before lock-up. But Temple was late, and Tom Cobbe was waiting at the gate to lock it, before he parted with Wilder. It was impossible for him to bring

the pistol-case in then. Who can doubt that it was agreed between them that Wilder should bring the pistols after dark, and that Temple wanted to go out in order to fetch them?"

"He may have *wanted* to go out," rejoined Burton, "but that is no proof that he *did* go out."

"It's no positive proof, of course," said Cressingham, "nor did anybody, so far as I know, see Temple lift the bar in the hall window after we were gone to bed, or creep out through the secret passage. But be sure he did, and old Nep, whom he did not know to be loose, followed him ——"

"Just so," broke in Burton, "nobody saw him, therefore nobody knows that he really did do it. And nobody has a right to say that he did it."

"Perhaps no one may have a right to *say* it," said Cressingham, "but they have a right to their own thoughts, and you cannot but think him guilty. Any how, if the Doctor knew that he was in the habit of getting out that secret way, he would never let him have this Hawley prize. You must allow that. Why, Clem, he'd expel any one he caught doing that—expel him without more words about it!"

"I wish you wouldn't worry me about this," said Burton, wearily. "I don't think you have a right to assume any of the things you have been claiming to know. It is only your guess that I am not doing my best, and I don't mind telling you that, in the main, you are wrong about that. There's been a good deal to bother and annoy me lately, and I don't feel up to much. It's only your guess, again, that Temple went out after we'd gone to bed, much less that he crept through that hole, and poor old Nep after him. Guesses, to my mind,

don't go for anything, and—and—and don't be angry with me, Fred," he added, suddenly changing his manner and holding out his hand; "I know you mean it all as kindly as possible, like the friend you always are and have been. But don't go on with this. It won't do any one any good."

Cressingham shook his friend's hand, and might have added some more, but at this moment the voice of the umpire was heard announcing that the hour was up, and the game concluded. It had been a very close and interesting match. Haverport had kicked nine goals and Holmwood ten; and this result, while it put the Holmwood lads in high spirits, did not depress the other party. Mutual compliments were exchanged between the two headmasters, as well as between the two rival teams, and arrangements made for the return match to take place some day towards the middle of December. After partaking of supper, the Haverport lads took their departure, well pleased with their day's sport; and their opponents, crowding into the school-room, began to discuss another topic, which the football match had hitherto kept in the background. This was the programme to be adopted on the occasion of the headmaster's birthday, the only whole holiday which occurred throughout the whole of the winter half-year. The birthday itself was the tenth of December, but it was always kept on the Wednesday nearest to that day, and this year the day for its observance would be the thirteenth. It happened opportunely that the hounds were to meet on that day at Darlaston Hall—the seat of Squire Wolford, who was a very popular personage, not only with the boys, to whom he always shewed kindness, but with the neighbourhood generally. Like Squire Hawley, he had once been the pupil of Dr

Thornton's father, and the schoolfellow of the Doctor himself, and he was wont to welcome most hospitably such of the boys as the headmaster, on rare occasions, allowed to visit him.

On the present occasion it was hoped that the first-class, and possibly the second also, might be allowed to attend the hunt breakfast, if Mr Hepburn, or haply the Doctor himself, could be prevailed on to escort them thither. In any case Graves, whose guardian and sister were to be present, and Taunton, whose father was master of the hounds, would be sure to obtain permission, and if they were to be allowed to go, and the Squire was willing to have a dozen more, why shouldn't they go too? The only difficulty lay in the numbers. There were ten first-class boys and twelve second. This was too large a party for even Squire Wolford to entertain. But presently it was discovered that a good many would be prevented by one reason or another from being present. Burton declared that he should prefer staying at home. He assigned no reason, but simply stated the fact. Cressingham had a sick headache and was indisposed for any amusement. Field had been sent for home, and two of the second-class had sustained so much damage in the football match that they could not walk the distance to Darlaston. Besides this it was found that Captain Gurdon had invited five of the first-class to join him in an expedition to the Witherne Caves, and dine at an adjoining farmhouse. In this manner the total of the first two classes would be reduced to twelve or so, and that was not a larger number than had gone over to Darlaston on previous occasions.

Captain Gurdon's invitation had been given to Wright and Winburne a day or two previously.

"It's much too late in the year for a water party, my lads,' he had said, "and no doubt the pleasantest mode of going to the Caves is by water; but I should like to show them to you, and we may not have another opportunity. We can have the large two-horse fly from the King's Arms, dine at Barnard's in the middle of the day, and come back to supper at my house. What do you boys say to it?"

"I say, sir," said Wright, to whom the question was more immediately addressed, "that I am very much obliged, and should enjoy going very much, and so I have no doubt would the others be, whom you are kind enough to ask. How many, and who are they?"

"There can be only five, I am afraid," replied the Captain. "If it were the summer or the autumn, it would be a different matter. We could go in a boat which would hold a dozen; but the fly wouldn't have room for more than the number I named. I could drive it, to be sure, and one could sit by me on the box; but you could hardly cram more than four inside. No; five must be the number, and those had better be Temple, Winburne, Hibbert, Warner, and yourself."

"We should all like that very much, sir, I am sure," said Winburne. "Do you wish George and myself to speak to the others, or will you invite them yourself?"

"I shall be away to-morrow," said Captain Gurdon, "and they might make some other arrangements if they weren't asked pretty soon. I think you had better give them the invitation in my name."

Wright had accordingly propounded the matter to his schoolfellows, all of whom eagerly caught at the notion, with the exception of Temple, who replied that he was greatly

obliged to Captain Gurdon for his kindness, but he had taken one holiday in order to play the football match with the Haverports, and he could not afford himself another.

"Oh, Charlie, do come!" Wright had said. "It will be such jolly fun. The Witherne Caves belong to Lord Wandesborough, you know, and he will only admit people by ticket to see them, and old Grimes says it isn't at all an easy thing to get tickets for it now. Then the old Captain is sure to give us a splendid lunch, and supper too. The Barnards, who live at Witherne Farm, close by, are old friends of his. Joe Barnard was a quartermaster on board his ship, I believe. We are to have the lunch at his house, and the Captain means to send over a lot of things besides—fish and game and two bottles of champagne, and I don't know what. Do come, Charlie; it will be glorious fun!"

"I daresay you'll think me very obstinate, George," said Temple; "but I made up my mind that I wouldn't strike work again until this Hawley Exhibition is decided."

"But, Charlie," said Winburne, "Graves is one of those going over to Darlaston. He is going to my certain knowledge; so you won't lose anything that he won't lose too. As for Burton, you needn't mind him, at all events."

"Why do you say that?" asked Temple, anxiously. "You don't mean that you know how the register stands? Those fellows haven't been looking again, have they?"

"Those fellows," repeated Winburne. "What, Dilke and Rawes do you mean? They haven't had the chance. They're not likely to find a second key of Hepburn's desk anywhere."

"Certainly not," observed Wright. "Nevertheless, if

Charlie is very anxious to hear how the register stands now, I could find out."

"How could you manage that, George?" asked Winburne.

"Never mind how—I could, and I shouldn't have to get hold of any one's key, or anything of the kind. Shall I do it, Charlie?"

"If you can find out without doing anything wrong or running any risk, of course I should like to know," replied Temple.

"Very good. I'll find out how the marks stand if I can."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE MEET AT DARLASTON.

DARLASTON HALL was a fine old English mansion, built early in the reign of Charles I., and exhibiting all the characteristic features of the architecture of that day; for it had undergone little change during the two succeeding centuries. There are some styles more pure, more imposing, and more graceful than the late Jacobean (or Caroline, as it is sometimes called), but none that is more picturesque. The quaint gables, the massive pillar-like chimneys, the huge bays, the long lines of shapely casements, each with its stone mullion and transom, the lofty pedimented doors, make up a frontage which, for artistic mingling of light and shade, can hardly be exceeded.

An English country house never shows to more advantage than on the morning of a hunt breakfast. The woods by which it is almost invariably surrounded are clad in the varied liveries of departing autumn—green, red, and yellow intermingling like the plumage of some tropical bird; the shrubberies and pleasure-grounds are alive with groups, which, for diversity of outline and colour, may match with those of the environing foliage. In the sweep before the house liveried grooms are leading away the horses from which red-coated owners have

just alighted; stout farmers on their serviceable cobs, though too conscious of the deficiencies of their "eddycation" to presume to take their place among the "quality" at the Squire's breakfast table, are nevertheless improving the occasion by copious draughts of the good ale which the steward and his myrmidons are liberally dispensing; groups of sturdy fellows in smock-frocks and scarlet-cloaked village dames look on admiringly, noting to one another each fresh arrival of some well-known neighbour. On the wide lawn the hounds are mustered under the charge of the huntsmen and whippers-in—the latter somewhat disposed to murmur at the length of time before the commencement of business; for, though the breakfast has been ordered at eleven o'clock, the meet is not to take place, even nominally, till twelve, and it will probably be later still before the real work of the day begins. Aware, however, of the fact, they console themselves—very completely, to all appearance—with the solid viands and potables brought out for their refreshment, while the dogs, who have no such sources of comfort, yelp and whimper at the unusual delay.

On the steps in front of the great Hall doors stands Squire Wolford, arrayed in the quaint, if not picturesque, hunting costume of the day, rendered familiar to all travellers by its frequent exhibition on the walls of tap-rooms and inn parlours. He is a fine specimen of the old English squire, of sixty—bluff, sound, and hearty, his hair only partially grizzled by years, and his strength and appetite as yet in no way impaired. He greets with a joyous shout and a cordial grasp of the hand the sportsmen in pink and green and black, as they ride up one after another.

"Ha, Taunton, glad you've arrived. Glorious day, isn't it? What a run we shall have! Good morning, my lord—particularly pleased to see you, they told me you wouldn't be able to come—were away somewhere."

"I have been in London," says Lord Wandesborough, "but returned yesterday in order to be here."

"Did you, that's hearty. How d'ye do, Lumley? How d'ye do, Miss Clara? You mean to follow the hounds, I suppose, on that clever pony of yours? Just the thing for you."

"No, Mr Wolford, I am afraid I am not horsewoman enough as yet to venture on that. Can you tell us if we are to see my brother here to-day?"

"Your brother? What! Stephen? Oh, to be sure, he is one of Thornton's boys. Yes, I believe so. There is a whole lot coming up from Holmwood—a dozen or so, so Mr Hepburn said. He is going to bring them, if I remember right—your boy among them, Taunton, you may be sure. Good day, Colonel Wilder, good day, Harry! Mean to be in at the death both of you, I'll wager it!"

"We mean to do our best that way," answers the Colonel, dismounting and committing the two horses to his son, for lack of a groom. "But this is Harry's first day with the hounds, and it is very likely it may be my last, for I seem to get shakier every time I try it on. So you mustn't be hard on either of us."

"Shaky, Colonel, not a bit of it. Ah, here comes Hepburn and the boys. How do, lads? How do, all of you? Go indoors and take your places in the dining-room. Breakfast is just going to begin. You'll find your father, Taunton,

and you, Graves, your guardian and sister. They were asking for you a moment ago."

The boys thronged in, nothing loth, and seating themselves at the long table, already half filled with guests, prepared to do justice to the delicacies spread in tempting profusion before them. They had had their usual half-past eight o'clock breakfast of "scrape" and "skye-blue," as they were wont to style it; but the three hours which had intervened, the brisk walk, and the sight of the dainties with which the board was loaded, had banished all recollection of the repast in question. Taunton and Graves were seated with their own friends; but the others, seven or eight in number, clustered close together, as if for mutual support in the campaign, which they were about to commence, taking care to keep as far as possible from Mr Hepburn's observation.

"Strange fellow, that Temple," whispered Dilke to Payne, as they took their places. "There is never any reckoning on what he will do, or what he will not do. Yesterday he told Hepburn, as plainly as possible, that he didn't wish to go to either Darlaston with the first and second class, or to Speneleigh with the juniors. He meant to stay at home, he said, if the Doctor would allow it."

"Yes," returned Payne, "and he had refused old Gurdon's invitation, just in the same way, a week before. The old Captain's back was a bit put up about it, I believe, but Temple didn't seem to mind. Wright and Winburne, too, his cronies, tried hard to persuade him to go to Witherne Caves, but Temple stood out about it, and wouldn't listen to them. And then this morning, just after breakfast, he went to the Doctor and told him he had changed his mind, and very

much wished to go to Darlaston to the breakfast, after all!"

"I wonder Thornton allowed it," remarked Dilke. "He doesn't in general allow fellows to play fast and loose in that way."

"I don't suppose he would," returned Payne, "but he had made a row, I believe, about Temple's staying at home; declared he would make himself ill, and all that sort of thing. I shouldn't be surprised if he had written about it to Mother Temple, for Charlie had a letter this morning, which he took into his study to read, and it was just after that that he went to the Doctor."

"Well, he was wise at all events," said Dilke; "a fellow is a fool who misses a spread like this, if he can go to it. And here comes the old Squire to take the end of the table, and Hepburn's going to say grace. Just what he is good for!"

Meanwhile, Temple had been manœuvring in vain to get the next place at the table to Harry Wilder. He had been induced to change his mind in the matter of the hunt breakfast, by a letter which he had that morning received—not as Payne had supposed, from his mother, but from his friend Harry. It informed him that the writer was anxious to see him as soon as possible; and as they were both, he believed, going to the meet, they had better choose their opportunity of meeting somewhere after the breakfast, privately in the grounds. Harry went on to say that Charlie must be sure to come, as the matter in hand was very pressing. Temple went immediately to Dr Thornton, and with some difficulty gained his permission to accompany his schoolfellows. He had encountered further difficulty from the senior usher, who had

expressed surprise at seeing him present himself as one of the party, and required an explanation, which Charlie had to stumble through as well as he could. He sat on thorns throughout the breakfast, unable to relish the delicacies, or enter into the fun which pervaded the whole table. He noticed that Harry Wilder seemed almost as uneasy as himself. He had been introduced by his father to a lady, who was evidently some relative or old acquaintance of the Colonel's, and who continued throughout the breakfast to ply him with questions, which Harry was obliged to answer. But he cast every now and then a glance at Charlie, which expressed an impatience of what was passing, which was almost equal to his own.

At length the entertainment came to an end. The health of the Squire had been drunk, with three times three, and responded to in a speech which evoked even greater enthusiasm. Then the party broke up, the carriage drive was thronged with red coats and stamping steeds; the hounds moved off under the convoy of the huntsmen to the cover appointed, and in ten minutes the old Hall was left to the occupation of the ladies, and such of the male guests as were disinclined, or unable, to witness the principal sport of the day.

At Squire Wolford's especial request, Mr Hepburn had allowed the boys to accompany the hounds to cover, and be witnesses of the scene, until the fox should be found and the hunt disappear in the distance; with the express condition, however, that they should not attempt to follow the hunt, but return forthwith to the Hall. While they were hurrying out under the Squire's escort, full of eager and joyous excitement,

Temple and Harry Wilder contrived to slip away from the throng of boys—who were too busy to trouble themselves about the movements of any living creatures, except the horses and dogs. Turning into a narrow shrubbery walk, they hurried along, till they found themselves on the edge of a thick plantation, having met no one but a red-haired rustic in a smock frock, who stared at them with dull and fishy eyes.

"This will do, Charlie," said Wilder. "We needn't go any further. Here is no one who can overhear us, excepting the sheep," he added, laughing, and pointing to a flock which had retreated to the cover of the wood, alarmed probably by the braying of the horns and the shouts of the crowd.

"Yes, this will do," assented Temple. "Well, Harry, what is it which you have to say to me?"

"What you won't like to hear, I am afraid. My father had a letter yesterday evening from Colonel M'Grath. He had already reached St Helena on his way homeward. The ship was to remain for a day or two at the island, and he had sent a letter by the *Argus*, a vessel which was just weighing anchor for England. But he expected, he said, to be at home almost as soon as the *Argus*, his own ship being the faster sailer. His arrival at Plymouth may be looked for any hour—that is, if he hasn't landed already!"

"He hasn't actually arrived, then?" asked Temple.

"No, he hasn't reached England, so far as we know," answered Wilder. "But there is small comfort in that."

"I don't know that," rejoined the other. "If he doesn't come——"

"What nonsense," broke in Harry Wilder, angrily. "It may put off discovery for twenty-four hours, perhaps, or pos-

sibly two days; but then everything is sure to be found out. There is nothing for it, Charlie, but to confess the whole matter at once. "I am sorry for you, of course; but I don't see——"

"Just wait a moment, Harry, and let me finish my sentence. If Colonel M'Grath doesn't arrive to-day, he may come as soon as he likes. I shall not care."

"What do you mean, Temple?"

"I'll tell you. I have found the pistol—that is, I know where it is."

"You do? Where and how did you find it?" exclaimed Wilder, in great surprise.

"Hush. Sit down on the stile here, and I will tell you. You know there is a very hard run going on between Burton, Graves, and myself for the Hawley prize——"

"Yes, I know that. I've heard of it several times."

"It has been thought a very doubtful matter by a good many of the fellows which of the three stands first in the register at the present time. Hepburn has kept the list of marks shut up close, and won't let any of the fellows look at it. There has been a great deal of curiosity on the subject."

"I daresay; but what then?"

"One of the fellows discovered accidentally that Hepburn had taken the register out of his desk, and carried it up into his bedroom. His bedroom is not kept locked, you know."

"And I suppose he went into the bedroom while Hepburn was out of the house, and looked at the register."

"Just so. He looked last night, and found out that I was eight marks above Burton, and three still above Graves."

"Really! Well, I congratulate you, Charlie, with all my heart. But I don't see——"

"You don't see," said Temple, filling up the void which the other had left, "what that has to do with Colonel M'Grath and his arrival in England."

"Well, no I do not, Charlie, and that's the fact."

"Nor do I. But the fellow who looked last night into Hepburn's room saw something else there besides the register. He saw a pistol——"

"A pistol!" exclaimed Wilder.

"A pistol; an old-fashioned pistol, with the letters M. M'G. engraved on it."

"How did Hepburn get hold of it?"

"That I can't say, or how long he has had it. I suppose he had offered a reward for it, and the person who picked it up, whoever he may have been, took it to him. You may remember that I wanted to offer a reward ever so many weeks ago, but I hadn't the means of doing it."

"And what do you propose to do now?"

"I shall go straight into Hepburn's room to-night and take the pistol away. I consider I have quite a right to do so. It was I who lost it, and I am going to restore it to its proper owner."

"There is something in that certainly," said Harry Wilder; "but I suppose you won't go and demand it of him. You'll wait till he is out of the way."

"I should like to claim it openly; but I can't do so without betraying the whole matter, and there are many reasons against doing that. Then I must get out the old way—I don't like it, but it can't be helped—and take it to——"

"The Gipsy's Hollow, and there, I suppose, you will expect to find me waiting for you," suggested Wilder. "Well, I have no doubt that will be best. If I get the pistol back, and replace it in M'Grath's box to-morrow night, he is, as you say, welcome to come back as soon as he likes. Well, really this is a great piece of luck! Of course, Hepburn doesn't suspect either who the fellow was who lost the pistol, or who the fellow was to whom it belonged, does he?"

"I have no reason for supposing that he does either the one or the other," was the answer.

"And your friends, Wright and Winburne——"

"Oh, they would say nothing, even if they knew all about this. But they don't. They were wondering what Hepburn could want with a pistol, and were speculating as to whether he was afraid of the house being robbed."

"That won't do, Charlie," said Wilder. "Hepburn, of course, will make a row about the pistol having been taken away, and your friends must suspect that it is you who took it."

"If they do, they'll hold their tongues; I'll go bail for it," said Temple. "I forgot there would be a row about the removal of the pistol. No doubt there will be; but that can't be helped, and there will be nothing to connect the pistol either with you or with me. If it is necessary, I will speak to George and Jack Winburne. I'll simply tell them that I borrowed the pistol to shoot the match with Graves—indeed they know that already; that I lost it in the shrubbery, and suppose that Hepburn must have found it himself, or that some one brought it to him, and that all I have done has been simply to take it and return it to its proper owner; that will be enough to tell them."

"Quite enough," assented Wilder. "There is no reason for their knowing anything more, and the less they know the easier for them. Well, that is settled then; and now I think the sooner we part company the better. We've been talking here a long time, and it will be a wonder if we are not missed. My pony is waiting for me in the Squire's stable-yard. I shall gallop after the hunt as hard as I can go. I daresay my father is miles away by this time—well up with the hounds, most likely, as he is on one of his best horses to-day, and always rides pretty straight. He won't take much heed of me, I expect, until the fox is killed. Good-bye, Charlie. By-the-bye, you didn't name the time when we were to meet at the Gipsy's Hollow."

"Better say a quarter before ten," said Charlie. "Hepburn is sure to go to the Doctor's study this evening, and he never leaves that before half-past ten. I shall go to his room near about half-past nine, and shall be back and safe in bed, I hope, before he has found out that the pistol has been carried off."

"All right," said Wilder, "I shall be sure to be there. Good-bye."

He hurried off through the shrubberies towards the stables, and in two or three minutes afterwards Temple saw him galloping at the utmost speed of his pony down the lane, hidden from the observation of the people still remaining at the Hall by the cover of a high hedge. Temple sat down on the stile for a few minutes, and looked after him.

"I suppose it must be all safe now," he reflected, "but we have had a narrow escape—too narrow to be by any means pleasant. I am clear ahead of Burton now, and there is very

little chance of our positions being reversed. When the last week's marks are added to the total I shall be at least eighteen or twenty in advance of him. And Graves hasn't caught me either, as I feared he had. It is a precious good job that I happened to be three or four marks above him when we first started on this race, or he would have been too much for me. I have never been able to gain a single mark on him. Well, there is only one week more, or rather three days more, and then it will be all over, and if I have a lead of only one mark it will be as good as a hundred. Well, Charlie Temple, my young friend, as the Doctor would say, you got yourself into a nice hobble—not that he'd say 'hobble,' which isn't classical—difficulty he'd call it—you have got yourself into a serious difficulty, and though you appear to have got out of it again, which is more than you deserve, I hope you will take warning, and be wiser another time. And now that you have had your lecture, which I hope will do you good, you had better go and join the others, or you will have old Hepburn down upon you."

He let himself down from the stile as he spoke, and made his way across the field into the lane, down which he had seen Harry Wilder disappear. Out of this one of the gates of the park opened. Temple entered by it, and presently found himself in front of the house, on the doorsteps of which a dozen or so of his schoolfellows were collected, with Mr Hepburn at their head, evidently in no very amiable frame of mind.

He was not half-way across the field, when a man who had been lying apparently in the ditch a few feet only from the stile, crept cautiously out, and getting behind the hedge, which

separated the field from the wood, began tramping up and down to warm himself. It was the same man who had met Charlie and Harry half-an-hour before. Probably from his appearance he was the shepherd, though, if so, he had allowed the sheep to stray to a considerable distance.

"Chilly work this," he muttered to himself, drawing, as he spoke, a flask from his pocket, and taking a long draught from it. "Enough to give a man his death of cold. However, I have got to the bottom of it now, and that is something; and it's what I suspected, and that is more. It's a good job, that they were so full of what they were talking about, that they took no notice of anything else, or they must have heard me creep up under the bank. Well now, there is no time to be lost. We must catch 'em to-night. I'd better see Mr Hepburn at once."

Meanwhile the last-named gentleman had seen Temple's approach as he came up the gravel walk.

"Here is another," he exclaimed angrily. "Where have you been all this time, sir? You were expressly told, as you know quite well, that you were not to attempt to follow the hounds."

"I haven't done so, sir; I assure you," said Temple demurely. "I have just been looking about me a little—just through the shrubberies to the edge of the wood, and back again by the lane."

"Humph," said Mr Hepburn with a dissatisfied glance at Charlie's coat and trousers, which indeed did not exhibit the damnatory evidence which the habiliments of some of his companions presented. "You ought in any case to have been here before this. Well, never mind now. Stay here with the

other boys, until we can find those still missing. They are Graves and Taunton, I believe. All the rest appear to be here."

"Here they come, sir," exclaimed Dilke, as three mounted figures, followed by a servant, came at a hard gallop across the meadows, and clearing the park fence at a bound, dismounted on the lawn.

"Yes, here they are, and I'm glad to see them safe," said the Usher. "Well, Graves, Taunton, O'Toole, what business had you ——"

"Sir James Taunton sends his compliments, sir," said the groom riding up, "and I was to tell you that he had taken the liberty of allowing the three young gentlemen to take a quarter of an hour's gallop before they went back to school, and he hopes you'll be so kind as to overlook it."

Mr Hepburn growled like a dog whose food is snatched from him, before his appetite is satisfied. But Sir James Taunton was a person of too great consequence to allow the Usher to say anything which might possibly give him offence. When he sent his son to Holmwood, and afterwards persuaded his neighbour, Mr Lumley, to send his ward there also, it was considered the school had gone up two or three degrees at least in the public estimation. It was even hoped that Lord Wandesborough's sons, the Honourable Master Wartons—that they too, when they grew old enough to be sent to school, might be numbered among the Doctor's pupils. Mr Hepburn was therefore constrained to desire the servant to take back his compliments to Sir James Taunton, and the young gentlemen had come back quite safe. He indemnified himself, however, as soon as the servant was out of hearing by ordering

the boys in a very gruff tone to fall in two and two, and set off on their walk homewards. "It will be nearly four o'clock before we are home," he said, "and I had an engagement which I was particularly anxious to keep at half-past three. Well, we must step out as fast as we can, and make up for lost time. What do you want my good friend," he continued, as a labouring man, dressed in a smock-frock and leather gaiters, and a hat with a large brim, came up apparently to speak to him.

"I wants to zay a wurd or two to 'ee, measter," said the man, whom, by the crook in his hand, Mr Hepburn now perceived to be a shepherd. "I wants to zay a wurd to 'ee, if 'ee could just wait a bit."

"I suppose these boys have done some mischief or other to this man's property, or his masters, thought Mr Hepburn, and he wants compensation. I must hear him, I suppose, though it's very tiresome. Well, my good man, what is it?"

"I'd rayther speak to 'ee aloane, zur, if 'ee please," returned the shepherd. "Send they there chaps away if 'ee please." Then observing that the Usher hesitated, he stepped close up to him and said in a low tone, quite different to the one he had spoken in before, "Bartholomew Baines."

Mr Hepburn started, and looked the man hard in the face. Then turning to the boys, he said: "This man has some complaint to make to me, I suppose. I must hear what he has to say, but I don't suppose it will take more than a minute or two. Walk on quietly towards Holmwood. I shall overtake you before long—quietly, mind, and keep to the road."

The boys, in no way enamoured of Mr Hepburn's society, complied willingly enough, and obeyed his injunctions with

tolerable fidelity till they were out of ear-shot, after which it is to be feared that his admonitions—that to walk quietly at all events—vanished wholly from their recollections. On the contrary, they began to talk all together, each one anxious to tell his own experiences, lending a deaf ear to those of his companions, who were equally anxious to impart theirs to him. Mr Hepburn's assurances that he would overtake them in a few minutes were not verified. They had reached home in fact fully half-an-hour before he arrived, looking very red and heated, and enquiring anxiously for Doctor Thornton.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### WITHERNE CAVES.

Captain Gurdon had mustered his party, and set off for Trawler's Gate, before Mr Hepburn and his boys had met in the schoolroom. The Captain was a man who would have his orders obeyed; and the fly from the King's Arms, and the four Holmwood boys invited to fill it, were at the old officer's house five minutes before the time named. But when they arrived there, they found that a change had been made in the programme of the day. The weather was so extraordinarily mild for the time of the year, and the wind so favourable, that Captain Gurdon had resolved, after all, on going to Trawler's Gate by water, and returning in the fly. Before seven o'clock, his favourite four oared boat, the *Havannah*, had been run down, her sails and oars got aboard, and the hampers stowed away in the bow and stern. The fly was directed to proceed about three in the afternoon to Barnard's farm-house, and there wait until the Captain and his guests were ready to return.

The four boys were all in the highest spirits. It had been agreed that no one should be invited to take Temple's place. There were none of the first or second class boys who were sufficiently intimate with the four invited, or with the Captain

himself, to make the companionship agreeable, and four were enough to row the boat to "Trawler's Gate" and fill the fly afterwards.

Captain Gurdon had been a good deal put out by Temple's refusal to join the party. He had taken a great fancy to the lad, and he was one of those thorough going partisans, who stick to a friend through thick and thin, as the saying is, until they are compelled by some unanswerable facts to distrust them, and then they give them up for good and all. There had been no facts—at least the Captain did not allow that there were any facts—to induce him to change his opinion of Charlie; and the oft-repeated encounters between himself and Mr Hepburn, only strengthened him in the notion he had adopted. Mr Hepburn persisted that no unprejudiced person could entertain any reasonable doubt of Temple's guilt, though the boy's cunning had been sufficient to evade actual proof. The Captain on his side argued that it was Hepburn's notorious dislike to Temple, and that only, which could blind him to the fact that there was no case at all against Charlie, but an overwhelming case against Graves. After repeated battles, at the end of which the combatants parted, more determinedly assured of the correctness of their several views than they were before the action began, they had at last tacitly dropped the subject; but both were aware that hostilities were only suspended, and if either champion should find his cause materially strengthened by any fresh evidence coming to light, war would be forthwith again declared.

"If I could only prove that Graves was out that morning," the Captain was wont to say to himself, "if I could only prove that, my case would be complete. And he *must* have gone

out. If the pistol case had been brought up after the servants were up and about, the person who brought it must have been seen; nor would Graves have been allowed to go out to meet him. And yet it is strange that the boy who took them at the coach office hasn't come forward to receive the reward I offered—five pounds. Graves may have given him a larger sum to hold his tongue, but that is surely most unlikely. Well, I must bide my time. I have a strong idea that the truth will come to light after all."

On the morning of the expedition to Witherne, the old man seemed to have for once altogether forgotten the subject; which on other occasions was tolerably sure to turn up sooner or later in any lengthened conversation, as King Charles's head was wont to crop up in Mr Dick's memorials. He bustled about, superintending the launching of the *Havannah*, and the careful conveyance of the hampers to the shore, which labours occupied him until past his usual breakfast hour. He greeted the boys on their arrival with an encomium on that excellent quality which they had displayed—punctuality; and in ten minutes more they were aboard the boat, the sail hoisted, while the Captain, seating himself in the stern, took the tiller.

"We shall get to Trawler's Gate, quite comfortably, in an hour and a quarter, or certainly in an hour and a half, if this wind lasts. What a strange climate ours is. Who would believe that this was the second week in December. It might be a morning in May."

"Do you think it will last, sir?" asked Wright.

"No," said the Captain, standing up and making a careful examination of the sky in all directions. "It will be fine all the morning I expect, but I won't answer for the afternoon

even. It is quite as well that we are to go back in the fly. I should not be surprised if there was heavy rain before nightfall, and that were followed by a sharp frost. But you lads wouldn't mind that, I dare say."

"No, we should like a frost, sir. There is capital skating on the bathing pond, and we have been getting tired of football for the last week."

They were now clear of the harbour, running easily along towards Cockle Head, with Crawley Head and Curlew beyond, standing out in bold and picturesque relief.

"What can that be out there, sir?" asked Wright, pointing to some object at a considerable distance out to sea. "It looks like the folds of a great snake. Is there such a creature as the sea serpent, sir?"

"I can't say," replied the Captain, smiling. "But I *can* tell you that that is not one, though you are by no means the first person who has made the same mistake. That is a shoal of porpoises you see tumbling one behind another. It is very unusual for them to come so near the coast as this. They are generally to be met with some considerable distance out to sea, where they will run along by the side of a ship, sometimes for half an hour together."

"Have you ever seen a sea-serpent yourself, sir?" asked Winburne.

"I can't say for certain that I have seen one," replied the Captain. "I have been on board ships, from which they were said to have been sighted; and once I did see something that looked very like one."

"Tell us about it, sir, if you please," said Hibbert. "We should all very much like to hear it."

"There is very little to tell, Hibbert. It was not very long after I went to sea. I was a midshipman on board the *Phosphorus*, a tolerable-sized frigate. We had been sent to cruise about between Shetland, the Faroe Islands, and the coast of Norway. One day, when the greater part of the officers and crew were down below at dinner, there was a great noise on deck. One of the middies came tumbling down among us, declaring there was a great big snake, as long as a ship's cable, to be seen, not two hundred yards off. We all rushed up on deck, and found half the ship's company staring hard at something or other about a quarter of a mile off, I should guess. It was lying flat on the sea, and was certainly bent in folds like a snake, and at one end there was something like a head sticking up four or five feet out of the water. But the sun wasn't out, and there was a heavy bank of clouds above it, and the water was so dark, that it was difficult to make out the exact shape of the creature. We were running away from it, too, before a stiff breeze, and in a few minutes it became impossible to distinguish it at all."

"Then you don't think it was a serpent, sir?" suggested Wright.

"I can't say what it was," answered the Captain. "We had a Norwegian sailor on board, who declared that sea-serpents, as big as what we had seen, were for ever shewing themselves off the Norway coast, and were as well known there as seals, or whales either. But others said it was nothing but a large lump of sea-weed, and certainly I have seen pieces of weed which were a good hundred feet long, bent and twisted just like a snake's body, and very near the colour too. I dont' know what to say about it, my lads. I suppose the

matter will never be set at rest, until a sea-serpent is thrown up or hauled ashore, and it wouldn't be a very easy thing to do that."

While this conversation was passing, the boat had steadily made its way round the rocky promontory known as Cockle Head, and under the steep Hanger Cliffs, with the narrow strip at their base, which was left bare only at low water and at certain states of the tide. These past, the boat came in sight of Trawler's Gate, as a wide opening in the rock was called, leading to a steep and very picturesque glen, at the top of which stood the Abbey ruins. Both these and the Witherne Caves were favourite places of resort during the summer months for such visitors as could obtain cards of admission from Lord Wandesborough or his stewards; though these, as has been already intimated, were somewhat charily dispensed to applicants.

"Here we are," cried the Captain, as the keel grated on the sand. "Now lads, we'll haul her up, and make her fast to the post there, and then carry up the hampers to Barnard's house."

The boys obeyed, nothing loth. With their united strength they dragged the vessel above high-water mark, and there secured her. Then they lifted out the baskets in which the Captain's good cheer had been stowed away, and conveyed them up the rude flight of steps which wound upwards through the narrow glen.

Barnard's farm-house was conveniently located in a slight hollow, some twenty yards from the Cliff, which rose precipitously from the sea-shore to the height of more than a hundred feet. It was an exceedingly picturesque looking building,

being designed as nearly as possible to harmonize with the grey old ruins in its immediate vicinity. Mrs Barnard, who was an old acquaintance of the Captain's, and was, moreover, well accustomed during the summer months to cater for visitors, readily undertook to have dinner ready for the party in an hour's time. Meanwhile they could examine the Witherne Caves, and it was arranged that after dinner they should make an inspection of the ruins before returning home.

They set out accordingly, under the guidance of a little lame girl, who was sitting working with her needle in the farm-house kitchen, and for the next hour were very busy in examining the curious hollows in the limestone rock, known as the Witherne Caves. The entrance to them was by a long narrow subterranean passage, which had been accidentally discovered only a few years before. When the visitor had passed through this, he found himself in a spacious and lofty chamber, imperfectly lighted by a few fissures in the rock above. The walls were, for the most part, as smooth and upright as though they had been the work of human art, while the roof above presented a rude arch, which also gave the idea that it had been carved by human hands. It was believed by some that the caves had been either altogether hollowed out by the monks, who from very early times, until the beginning of the sixteenth century, occupied the Abbey of St Witherne; or at all events had been enlarged by them to their present dimensions. This latter theory, at all events, had probably some truth in it. The remains of a subterranean passage might clearly enough be traced from the convent cellars to the rocks immediately adjoining the entrance to the caves. In the days when the English coast was

liable to be continually visited by the Danish Pirates, who shewed no more respect for friars and nuns than for the other inhabitants of the land, such places of retreat were common enough.

"Ay, ay," said the Captain, when this theory was propounded to them by their little lame guide; "that's likely enough, my lass. I daresay there was a beacon always kept ready on the top of Hanger's Cave out yonder; and when the Danish galleys came in sight, the good fathers would pack up their valuables, and retreat into these caves, the entrance to which was hidden, I'll be bound, cleverly enough."

"Wouldn't they soon be starved out, sir?" suggested Wright. "There doesn't seem to be any way out of the caves but that by which we entered. The Danes would have them here like rats in a trap."

"So they would, Wright, if they'd had patience to wait. But the Danes were too restless for that. They'd torture, and kill, and sack all they could find. But when they'd done that, they'd want to be off again to torture, and kill, and plunder somewhere else. The monks would come back and find their convent wrecked most likely, and such of their neighbours as hadn't been able to escape, murdered or carried off. But they'd be thankful to escape with a whole skin, and set to work re-building the abbey as well as they were able."

"They must have been pleasant times to live in, sir," observed Winburne.

"Ay, my lad," responded the Captain. "I haven't much patience with the people who are not contented with old England in the nineteenth century; it would do them good to make them live six months in any other period of the world's

history. I judge they would be thankful enough at the end of that time to get back to the nineteenth century again."

It took fully an hour to explore the various windings in the rock, where they sought in vain to discover any secret mode of egress. The Captain was at last obliged to remind them that their dinner was waiting at the farm-house, and that Mrs Barnard's cookery might suffer if they kept it waiting. They adjourned thither accordingly, and for the next hour enjoyed themselves fully as much as they had done during the previous one. The Captain sat at the head of the table, watching with much satisfaction the disappearance of the dainties which he had provided. So far, at all events, his party had been a decided success.

The dinner was over, however, at last. Not even a school-boy out on a party of pleasure can eat for ever. The afternoon was wearing on, and the short winter's day must before long come to a conclusion. Moreover, the Captain, as he stepped to the window with a sailor's instinct, once more to examine the state of the sky, saw only too plainly that the change he had predicted had already taken place, and that a storm would probably break out before the hour had passed.

"We must make as short an examination of the ruins as we can," he said. "There may be a heavy downfall of rain in an hour, or even half-an-hour's time. Barnard, will you see the hampers packed and put on the top of the fly. The driver must have it round at your door in an hour at furthest. Here, Susie, my dear," he continued, addressing the little lame girl. "Come with us and shew us the way. Why, you get along pretty briskly, little maid," he added, noticing how deftly she handled her little crutch.

"Yes, sir," she answered; "I get on well enough. Brother Hugh is a deal worse than I am."

"Brother Hugh?" repeated Captain Gurdon. "Is he lame as well as you?"

"He is now," she answered; "but he has been so only since August last. He had a fall and hurt himself, and he can't get out of bed, but doctor says he'll get well in time, though I shall never be better."

"And where do you live, Susan?"

"Oh, close by," she answered. "You can't see the house. It's just round the turn of that rock."

"Well, here are the ruins, boys," said the Captain. "Many people think them more interesting even than the caves. Look how thick the walls are, and how rudely, yet how strongly, the stones are put together. These were built in very ancient times."

"Before William the Conqueror, I suppose, sir?" asked Warner.

"Yes, my lad, many hundred years before him most probably. It is said, I am told, that it is one of the oldest ruins in England. If we had time we might trace out the whole of the plan of the ground floor, I believe—the entrance gates, and the porter's lodge, and the chapel, and the refectory—that is the eating-room, you know. But we shan't be able to do that for the rain, I am afraid. Yes, it's beginning now, and it's going to be very heavy too. We shall be wet through before we can reach the farm-house, I'm afraid. Is there no place where we can take shelter here, Susie?"

"Better come to our house, sir," said Susan. "'Taint thirty yards off."

"Oh ay, to be sure, I'd forgotten your house. Shew us the way my good girl; come along lads." Susan led the way, and in two or three minutes the party were safely housed in a small cottage nestling under the high cliff, that at once sheltered and hid it from sight. A decent looking woman, who was busy washing, appeared somewhat surprised at the entrance of so many visitors.

"Ask your pardon, ma'am," said the Captain politely. "We've been caught in the rain, which I fancy will come down pretty heavily. Will you be so kind as to give us shelter till it's over?"

Mrs Gray, as the woman was called, bustled about and placed chairs for her visitors. "Quite welcome, sir, I'm sure," she said. "Yes, it's going to rain heavy, but it won't last, I judge. Susie, you'd better go to your brother; he's been fretting after you."

The Captain took a chair. "A nice little girl, your daughter," he said. "I'm sorry to think she's so afflicted."

"She don't seem to mind it, sir," said Mrs Gray. "She was born so, you see, and has never known anything else. And she don't suffer no pain. It's different with my Hugh. He's getting better, and the doctor tells me that in time he'll have the use of his legs again. But it's hard for a boy of his age to lie there day after day and not be able to move, let alone the pain."

"How did it happen, ma'am?" enquired the Captain.

"Well, sir, it were a fall off a ladder more than three months ago. Yes, it was last Saturday sixteen weeks—the nineteenth of August—I remember it well."

"Saturday, the nineteenth of August," repeated the Cap-

tain. "Ay, I remember that day too. But how did it happen?"

"Well, sir, I don't know all the rights of it myself. You see Hugh went into Walescliff—'twasn't on the Saturday he went in, but on the Friday, and he was coming back again by the road when he meets a young gentleman—a tall strong young gentleman, who asked him if he wanted to earn a half-crown. My boy had never had so much money in his life, and, to be sure, he said he did. 'What was he to do for it?' 'You must go down to the inn where the London coach stops,' said the young gentleman. 'It won't come in till three or four o'clock or so in the morning, but you must wait till then. Then you ask for a parcel directed to Mr Graves.'"

"Graves!" exclaimed Winburne, starting with surprise.

"Be quiet, Winburne," said the Captain. "Please to go on ma'am."

"For Mr Graves of Holmwood Priory," repeated the woman. "I know that's right, because Hugh made him write it down on a piece of paper, and he'd got it in his pocket when he was brought home. Well, sir, Hugh went back into Walescliff and waited in the inn yard till the coach came in. Then he asked for the parcel, which was given him."

"Do you remember if you heard what the parcel was like?" asked Captain Gurdon.

"It was a small wooden box," said Mrs Gray, "not above two inches deep. Hugh said it was heavyish; but he could carry it easy enough. Well, he got to the house, but he couldn't get in. There's a great high wall all round it, he says."

"Yes, I know," said the Captain. "Go on."

"Hugh didn't know what to do; but presently he heard the gentleman calling to him through the key-hole of the door, 'Have you got them?' says he. Hugh told him that he had. 'Then,' says the gentleman, 'if you look about you, down by the barn yonder, you'll see a ladder, and you must fetch it and put it against the wall here, and mount up by it.' Well, Hugh found it. It was as much as he could do to carry it, and he fixed it, and got up to the top of the wall with it. But then he found he'd left the case behind. The gentleman gave him a deal of bad language, he said, and told him to go down and fetch it. But Hugh had got frightened. He was always a meek boy, and he came back presently, and said he couldn't find it. And then Mr Graves—that's his name—told him to put the ladder down to him, and he'd go and look. 'Do you stay here on the top of the wall,' he says, 'and call out to me if you see any one at the windows, or hear any noise.' My boy does as he's told, and Mr Graves goes and presently comes back with the case. 'You had left it under the barn wall,' he said, 'where you took the ladder from,' Then he mounts up, and pays Hugh the money—I won't say but what he paid fair enough—and tells him to be off. But he didn't hold the ladder for him, and Hugh was that frightened that he'd no sooner put his foot upon it, than he and the ladder came to the ground together. Mr Graves, he lets himself down from the wall and picks Hugh up, and carries him into the barn, and lays him on a heap of straw. 'Lie here,' he says, 'quietly a bit, and then you'll be able to walk again.' Well, Hugh says he don't know rightly what happened after that. He lay half stupid; but he thinks he heard a lot of voices near him, and he's sure there was a dog barking and a pistol fired."

The Captain looked round and held up his hand, as a caution to the boys to be silent.

"Finish your story, if you please, ma'am," he said. "How did your son get home?"

"He came home in a carrier's cart, sir. You see there is a carrier goes to and fro between Haverport and Walescliff during the summer months. He goes into Walescliff on the Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and goes back to Haverport on the Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. He starts pretty early in the morning, and he got to Holmwood (as I am told they call the place) not very long after daybreak on that Saturday morning, so he told me."

"Go on, Mrs Gray, if you please," said Captain Gurdon, as she paused for a moment.

"Well, when he got nigh the house, he sees the doors of the great barn open, and our Hugh lying in a faint, and Mr Graves standing over him. He asks what's the matter, and the young gentleman tells him that our Hugh had had a tumble from a wall; but he thought he was more frightened than hurt. 'I don't know what to do with him,' he says, 'and I can't send him home, because I don't know who he is nor yet where he lives.' 'I know, though,' said the carrier. 'It is Hugh Gray, son of Thomas Gray, of Trawler's Gate, out Horncombe way.' 'Do you know his father's cottage?' says the gentleman. 'I know quite well,' says the carrier. 'I go within a hundred yards of it.' 'Oh, you do!' says Mr Graves. 'Then perhaps you'll take him home, and I'll give you half-a-crown for the job. The sooner he's gone the better,' says he. 'There's a brute of a dog up at the house here, which some one, I find, has

been and let loose. If he gets out here, and he's as likely to do it as not as soon as the gate's opened, he'd very probably see this boy and grab hold of him. He'd best not gab me, though,' he says. 'He did it once, and I let him off; but if he does it again, he'll wish he hadn't.'"

"You are sure he said that, are you, Mrs Gray?"

"Well, sir, I didn't hear him, to be sure; but that's what the carrier told me he said."

"Of course that is what I mean," returned the old Captain. "Please to go on, ma'am."

"Well, sir, he agreed to take the lad, and they lifts him into the cart between them. Then Mr Graves puts the ladder against the wall of the house and mounts up, and calls to the carrier to put the ladder into the barn, and then come for his half-crown. Well, he does, and Mr Graves gives him the half-crown, and then the man drives off and brings my boy home. We put him to bed, and there he has been ever since."

"But you said, Mrs Gray, that your boy heard a dog barking and a pistol fired. When did that happen?"

"Hugh don't seem to know rightly when it was. He was in a sort of dwam after his fall until he got home. Everything was confused like. Only he's sure about the dog and the shot. But you'd best go in and speak to him yourself, sir. Hugh's quite right in his head, though his leg is still bad."

"I should be very glad to do so, if you will kindly allow it," said the Captain. "Boys, stay here till I come back, and be so good as to say nothing further to Mrs Gray on this subject."

The boys promised, though with somewhat rueful faces, and the Captain disappeared, ascending the steep cottage staircase.

He was absent about a quarter of an hour, and then returned, radiant with triumph.

"All right, my lads," he exclaimed; "the matter now, at all events, is as clear as the day. You must still keep what you've heard to yourselves for a few hours more; but some time to-morrow everything shall be cleared up. Mrs Gray, will you give me the name and address of the carrier?"

"His name is Andrew Giles, sir, and he lives in King's Row, Haverport. I don't rightly remember the number."

"Never mind that; I shall find him out. I shall come to-morrow with a gentleman to take down your son's deposition. He is quite willing to make it, he says. We shall be here tolerably early."

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE GIPSY'S HOLLOW

Burton and Cressingham, as the reader has already been informed, had to pass the morning of the headmaster's birthday at home. Cressingham had been very unwell on the previous day, and had not felt it safe to accept Squire Wolford's invitation. His head was a good deal better on the morning of the hunt breakfast, and he might have asked for leave to withdraw his refusal, if Temple had not done the same thing only a few minutes before. The Doctor had expressed both surprise and annoyance in his reply, and Cressingham saw plainly that a second petition of the same kind, if it was not peremptorily refused, would be very reluctantly granted. And after all, as Burton was not going, and Graves and Rawes —to whom he bore a very decided dislike—were, he did not very much regret his exclusion. He might have gone with the juniors, who, under the escort of Mr Wilkes and Mr M'Donald, were to make an excursion and dine at the inn in Spenewood. But there was no one nearly of his own age among the boys who composed the party, and the society of the two ushers was not very attractive. He preferred that of Burton, who, for some unknown reason, had asked leave to

remain at the Priory in preference to attending the hunt breakfast.

"You don't care for the sport or the breakfast either, hey, Burton?" said the headmaster, when his senior scholar had made his request.

"No, sir," answered Burton. "I can't say I have any great fancy for either the one or the other."

"And you are not one of Captain Gurdon's party either, I see?" pursued the headmaster, glancing at the lists which Mr Wilkes had delivered to him.

"No, sir," answered Burton; "he has not invited me."

"I am afraid you would find the excursion to the inn in Spenewood rather dull work. If it was summer, and the leaves were out, and the flowers in the lanes, it would be a different thing."

"I don't wish to go to Spenewood, sir."

"Stay at home and keep Cressingham company, eh? He is obliged to stay behind. That would be a kind act, Burton; and he's an old friend of yours. Yes, I will allow you to do that."

Burton was apparently about to disclaim the motive attributed to him, but after a moment's thought, changed his intention and remained silent.

"Very well, Burton," the Doctor said. "It shall be so arranged. You and Cressingham will remain behind. There will be no one left in the house but you two and Mrs Skinner, and you will get nothing but cold meat for dinner, but you mustn't mind that."

Burton bowed and withdrew. The two senior boys saw their schoolfellows set out in various directions, and were presently left alone before the schoolroom fire.

"What'll you do, Clem?" asked Cressingham, presently. "Will you play a game of chess or dominoes, or hear that jolly book that Herbert has lent me? Shall I read aloud for both our benefits?"

"No, Fred," said Burton, "not just now, if you please. By-and-bye, I daresay, but not now."

"You were wanting to see my book of autographs, Clem," said Cressingham. "I had not fastened them all in when you spoke to me about it, but they're all right now. Shall I go upstairs and fetch it?"

"No, thank you, Fred. I—I don't feel in the humour for it just now."

Cressingham shrugged his shoulders, and taking out his blotting-book, began to write a letter, while Burton seated himself in the window, and sat looking out into the court-yard. It was not a very interesting view, consisting of nothing in fact but the high walls surrounding the premises, and the iron gate, which Mrs Skinner, apprehensive of thieves, had taken care to lock.

An hour and more passed thus. Cressingham finished his letters and put away his writing case, remarking at the same time, that it was a good job got over, though he supposed they could not go till the next day.

Burton started, as he heard the remark. "Not go? Why not? Fred," he asked. "The postman always takes the letters back."

"Yes, but he won't come to-day, you know."

"The postman not come," repeated Burton in dismay. "Why not?"

"Oh, didn't you hear? It was arranged that Cobbe should call as he went by, and take any letters there might be. Four-

fifths of the fellows, you know, belong to the Speneleigh party, and nearly all the masters, and there could be no letters to take back. So it was agreed that that would be the best way."

"I don't see that," said Burton, evidently annoyed. "What is to become of your letters then and mine? Cobbe wouldn't take them, I suppose."

"No, of course not," rejoined Cressingham. "Nor would he take those of the fellows who have gone to Darlaston or to Trawler's Gate. They'll all come up to-morrow morning. I don't suppose there will be anything but what can wait till then."

Burton made no answer. He got up, sauntered about a little, then muttering something about fresh air, he went out into the play-ground.

Cressingham looked after him with some surprise, and seemed for the moment half inclined to follow him. But if so, he changed his mind, and taking out a book began reading.

He saw no more of his friend again till dinner-time, and then he appeared even more depressed than before. In reply to Cressingham's inquiry as to where he had been, he answered, nowhere in particular, and then suddenly changed the subject to some remarks about the fun the fellows would have at Darlaston. But this topic soon languished and another silence succeeded. Cressingham made no further attempt to overcome his companion's reserve. After dinner, Burton sat down to write a letter, which apparently cost him a good deal of trouble. He folded, sealed, and directed it, and then once more sauntering into the play-ground was seen no more.

About four o'clock, the boys from Darlaston returned, and in another hour or so the main body from Speneleigh arrived, and the schoolroom once more resounded with a chorus of eager voices. The juniors had had great fun at Speneleigh. The old pony had run away with the cart which Tom Cobbe was driving, and very nearly upset the concern, dishes, plates, glasses, and all, into a ditch. In fact, Tom had only averted the catastrophe by running Billy's head into a large thorn bush which grew on one side of the lane. Tom had declared that old Billy, who in general was as steady as Father Time himself, had been instigated to this act of insubordination by a bunch of prickly gorse, which some of the juniors had stuck under his tail, while their companions distracted Tom's attention on the other side. But as Tom had escaped without personal damage, and with only the loss of one mug, which had been shaken off on the occasion of Billy's first plunge, and he was perfectly aware that he would get nothing but additional aggravation by attempting to bring home the offence to any of the boys, he was wise enough to drop it. Mr Wilkes had taken his seat at dinner in the midst of a colony of red ants, from which he had considerable ado to rid himself, and the three-legged stool on which Mr M'Donald had located himself having broken down, the usher had rolled ignominiously in the dust. A complaint, too, had been brought to Mr Wilkes by the landlord of the "Royal Oak" that his pigs had been let out into the wood, and one of his horses, or rather two of them, had been made to perform a kind of extempore steeplechase over a series of hedges and ditches which bordered on the forest. But no one knew who had been the offenders—the boys apparently, least of all, and

as all the animals had been recovered and apparently had sustained no injury, no notice was taken.

The mirth of the Darlaston party was fully equal to that of their younger school-fellows. Graves, O'Toole, and Taunton, who had been permitted to accompany the hunt for a mile or two, had of course their tales to tell of the leaps they had taken, and the spills they had witnessed, and the like. But the great incident of the day had been O'Toole's adventure with the whipper-in.

"Tell us about it, Maurice," said Taunton. "I heard some of it, but not all. What made you take Jack Raggett's horse? I know him well. He has been in our service a year. He is about the crustiest chap going. How came you on his horse?"

"How came I on his horse," repeated O'Toole. "Why wouldn't I be on his horse, when I thought he'd lent it to me?"

"But what made you suppose that, Paddy?" rejoined Taunton.

"What else would I suppose?" inquired O'Toole. "Didn't he say to me, 'Will ye take my horse, sir, for a minute or two?' And sure I didn't mean to keep it for more than a minute or two, but by all the powers I forgot the time!"

"I heard what passed," said Hill laughing. "Mr Wolford had called to Jack Raggett that he wanted to speak to him. He wasn't above forty or fifty yards from him. But there was a sunk fence and a lot of marshy ground between them. Raggett didn't want to leap his horse into the swamp, and he would have had a very long way to go if he had ridden round. So he asked Maurice 'to hold his horse for a minute or two,'

"JACK RAGGETT RAN BACK HALLOOING TO O'TOOLE."

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meaning while he got over the fence and spoke with the Squire. But before Jack had gone half a dozen yards, Maurice was in the saddle; and in another minute the fox had been found, and the whole field was off after him, Maurice among them. Jack Raggett ran back hallooing to O'Toole to pull up, and garnishing his speech with a string of oaths, but Maurice wouldn't stop."

"How could I stop, and the brute pulling like a wild elephant?" interposed O'Toole. "Sure, I promised to hold him, and so I would have done, but I might as well have tried to hold a flash of lightning!"

"What happened next?" asked Cressingham, who was listening, much amused, to what was passing.

"Oh, we all went on together across half a dozen fields, till we came to a check just at the brook. Maurice had sat his horse over a fence or two—"

"Over three fences, my boy, a five-barred gate and a double post and rail," shouted O'Toole. "By the same token the last was a rasper. Didn't the baste come down upon his nose over it, and didn't I lift him up again as neat as a ninepin, and none the worse, forbye his mouth full of mud?"

"I don't know about that, Maurice," said Taunton. "Jack Raggett didn't compliment you much on your riding, when he came up!"

"The big bla-guard," cried O'Toole. "It was he didn't know how to thank a gentleman for taking care of his horse! But the Squire cut him short, and spoke up like a gentleman, as he is. 'Mr O'Toole,' says he, 'Ye ride like an Irishman,' and to be sure, there couldn't be a bigger compliment than that!"

There was a general laugh. "Why, Maurice," said Payne, "that was exactly what Jack Raggett said, only Mr Wolford didn't hear him. 'Who is he?' he calls out to us, as he saw you gallop off on his horse. 'Who is he? Is he one of your party, gentlemen?' I called out to him that 'it was Mr Maurice O'Toole, a native of Tipperary, in Ireland, and a pupil of Dr Thornton's.' 'An Irishman is he?' cries he. 'I should have guessed as much from the manner in which he rides!'"

"The villain!" shouted the indignant Hibernian. "If ever I come across him again, I'll lay a thick stick across his shoulders for his impudence."

"Impudence!" repeated Taunton. "Why, you said just now that there couldn't be a greater compliment than to say you rode like an Irishman!"

"Did I?" said O'Toole. "Well, maybe I did. But you see, Squire Wolford meant one thing by it and Raggett, the negur, meant another, and that makes all the difference. It's like Tim O'Grady's two friends—"

"Who's Tim O'Grady?" asked Dilke.

"He's a Tipperary boy," said O'Toole; "and he was going home from Ballycooney Market, when he meets Phil M'Carthy, a decent lad as ye'd meet any day. 'What is it, Phil?' asks O'Grady. 'Sure, I am going up to Mr Gwynne's,' says he, 'to ask him to let me have the lease of the farm that's just fallen vacant.' 'I wish ye may get it, Phil,' says O'Grady. 'Thank ye kindly,' says M'Carthy, and walks on. Presently Tim meets Pat O'Leary, the biggest scoundrel on this side of Galteemore, and as ugly as a scarecrow besides. 'How goes it, Pat?' asks O'Grady. 'Sure I'm going up to Kathleen

O'Connor'—who was the darling of the world for beauty—'sure I'm going up to Kathleen, to ask her to take me for her sweetheart!' 'I wish ye may get it, Pat,' says O'Grady. 'Ye villain,' says O'Leary, 'what do ye mean by that?' and pulls off his coat and wants to fight him. So ye see, it's what a man manes, and not what he says, that makes the difference."

"I see, Maurice; but how do you know that the Squire *did* mean a compliment after all?" asked Rawes.

"How do I know it?" exclaimed O'Toole. "Why, by what he said, Dick Rawes. 'I am afraid we must send you back, Mr O'Toole,' he says, 'or the Doctor won't be pleased with us. But it's proud of your company that I am.' More by token, the whipper-in never said a word after that."

"Not a word that you heard, Maurice," observed Taunton. "But I won't answer for what he may have said, when the Squire was out of hearing. But never mind. It was capital fun while it lasted. The only pity is that old Hepburn wasn't a hundred miles off."

"At this moment Wright and his three companions entered the room, and repaired at once to Temple's study. But he was not to be found, and they were informed by one of the juniors that he had gone upstairs soon after his return from Darlaston, and had not been seen since.

"I suppose he has got leave to sit in his bedroom," said Winburne. "He has taken to doing that of late when there is a great row down below. Well, I suppose, when the Hawley prize is settled, as it will be now in a couple of days or so, Charlie will give us some more of his society."

"He is right to keep at it just now," observed Warner.

"Graves has been writing one of his tip-top essays, for which his set expect that the Doctor will give him marks enough to send him up to the top of the list; and Charlie's been working tremendously over some Greek verses from one of Shakespeare's plays, which he hopes will keep him above Graves. This is just the rush, you see, between the distance post and the judge's stand. If Graves doesn't pass him now, he won't at all."

"Graves will never pass him, that is certain," remarked Wright. "The Captain will shut him up for good and all to-morrow. He has written off about this fellow Giles, the carrier at Haverport, you know. He has written off to him already. While they were getting down the luggage from the fly, he went into his parlour and wrote a note to some fellow, —a lawyer, I believe, in Haverport—telling him he means to call upon him the first thing in the morning, and that he is meanwhile—this evening, I suppose—to make an appointment with Giles; and he has ordered the fly to be at his house at seven to-morrow."

"Phew!" exclaimed Winburne, "the old fellow is in a hurry, indeed. I shouldn't have thought there was any need for all that hurry either."

"Well, it isn't his impatience altogether," said Wright. "He never likes waiting, that is certain. But, you see, he is afraid, if the story gets about, that Graves will hear of it, and contrive some means of getting out of it. He means to take him quite by surprise."

"That he will do, I expect," said Warner. "He will take everyone by surprise, I should think, except us four."

At this moment the supper bell rang, and the boys betook

themselves to the dining-hall, fully prepared, notwithstanding the liberal feasting of the forenoon, to do justice to the cheer provided for them. They retired to bed, however, immediately after.

A little more than half an hour afterwards the door of the schoolroom was cautiously opened, and some one entered. It was almost pitch dark, the only light being what came in through the cracks of the window shutters from the wintry sky outside. Whoever the person was, he was evidently well acquainted with the locality, for he moved steadily on, feeling his way by the forms and desks until he reached the middle window. Then there came the sound of the unbarring of the shutters, and then the pale gleam of the starlight. Presently one of the upright bars which protected the window was drawn out, the sash gently pushed up, and the figure crept stealthily out, carefully closing the window behind him. Almost immediately afterwards another dark form stole forth from behind the headmaster's desk, where it had been hiding, lifted the sash, and followed.

Though there was no moon, the night was cloudless, and there was sufficient light to enable the second of the two adventurers to see with tolerable clearness what was passing. Stepping behind a buttress, Baines, the constable, watched the figure of Charlie Temple, as he moved silently along under the shadow of the building, until he entered one of the outhouses in the wood-yard. The constable again withdrew from sight, expecting to see the boy reappear with a ladder by which to scale the wall. But the door remained closed, and after a time Baines pushed it open and entered. It was an old disused wash-house apparently, with an empty cupboard in one

corner. Somehow or other its occupant had disappeared. A good deal puzzled, the constable proceeded closely, by the help of his dark lantern, to search every nook and corner, but there appeared to be no mode of exit. At length he set himself to examine the bottom of the old sink, which he tried to lift up. It came away easily enough, and, being removed, disclosed a flight of stone steps winding through the thickness of the wall. Descending these he presently found himself pushing his way through a quantity of brushwood, and at once emerged into an open drain lying immediately under the walls of the Priory. Scrambling out as well as he was able, he hurried along the path leading through the wood till he reached a large tree known by the name of "The Prior's Oak," under which tradition said that the Prior of Holmwood, in ancient days, was wont to dispense justice.

Here he stopped, and struck three blows with his staff on the trunk of the tree, when he was joined by a tall dark figure which had been hiding under the roots on the other side.

"Is that you, Baines?" said a low voice.

"Yes, it's me, sir. Have you seen Mr Temple go by?"

"Some one passed two or three minutes ago. He was muffled up, so that I could not make out who it was."

"Which way did he go, sir?"

"Into the thicket yonder. He passed between those two oaks and turned to the right."

"Come along, sir, as quick as you can. We've no time to lose."

They hurried through the shrubbery, and in a few moments reached the small open glade, which has already been described as the "Gipsy's Hollow." Listening intently, they heard voices at a short distance, and crept close up unnoticed.

"You are sure it's the right pistol?" said some one.

"Yes," was the answer, "there can be no doubt about that. I stopped a moment when I had got clear of the house to examine it. I had only seen it once before; but I can't be mistaken. There's the old Indian work you were speaking about, on the stock and barrel. And there are the letters M. M. G. I'll light my lamp again for you to make sure yourself, if you like."

"Well, you may as well. I don't suppose there can be any mistake; but it will be a comfort, to be sure." With some difficulty the lamp was lighted, and the light, as it was turned on the pistol, showed plainly the faces of Harry Wilder and Charles Temple.

"It's all right," said the former. "You may put out the light again. Well, I must say I'm extremely glad. It would have been worse for you, Charlie, of course, than for me. But I should have been extremely sorry if old M'Grath, who is always very kind to me, had come home and asked me for his pistols, which he had left in my charge, and I had not been able to give them back to him."

"I can understand that, Harry. I knew it to be your feeling. But for that I should not have made use of that secret passage again. I am heartily sorry I ever made use of it at all."

"Well, it is all right now, Charlie."

"Ah, no, Harry, it is not all right. It may be all right about this pistol, but not about poor old Nep. I can't bring him to life again. I have worked pretty hard for the last three months to get this scholarship. But I would have toiled like a galley slave, and glad, if I could have brought that

about. I mean to go to old Gurdon as soon as this prize has been settled, and I hope he will forgive me. It will be a great relief to have it out with him, at all events."

"Old Gurdon is a kind-hearted old fellow. You won't have any difficulty with him," said Wilder.

"I hope not; but he is not the only one whose pardon I ought to ask. The Doctor has been very kind to me ever since I have been here. I feel every day that I have been ungrateful. I ought never to have gone out by that passage. I didn't think what I was doing, and that is the fact."

"Why don't you go at once and tell him about the passage?" asked Harry. "Good fellow as he is, you might be sure he wouldn't be hard upon you."

"I am not afraid of his being so," returned Temple. "But see here, Harry, I promised Dick Plumridge three years ago, when he told me about this passage, that I would never tell anyone of its existence, as long as I remained at Holmwood. It was a foolish promise, I grant you; but as I made it, I ought to keep to it."

"You are right there; but you mean to tell him of it when you leave, do you not?"

"Yes, the moment I feel at liberty to do so."

"Well, Charlie, you have always spoken kindly of Thornton. It is of Hepburn only that you have complained."

"Hepburn! Ay, he does not like me, that is certain. But even there I have been to blame. He is stern and severe, no doubt, but he is just and right-minded; and I have given him a great deal of provocation. A fellow feels differently when he is just going away for good and all from anywhere. I should like to make it up with him and have

his pardon too. But he has so strong a feeling against me, that I am afraid it would be very little my attempting it. Most likely he would mistake my motives. Well, good-night, Harry. We had better not stay here any longer."

"Good-night, Charlie. I hope that the next thing I shall hear is, that you have been appointed Hawley exhibitioner."

"Are you going to let Mr Wilder carry off the pistol, sir?" asked Baines in a subdued voice. He had been expecting every moment to receive an order to interpose. "If we don't make haste," he added, "it will be too late to stop him."

"Hush!" returned the usher in the same guarded tones. "I think it will be better not to interfere with young Mr Wilder at all."

"Not interfere with him, sir? I don't see how we can help interfering with him. Unless Mr Temple confesses everything to-morrow, which is a great deal more than I expect, we shall require Mr Harry Wilder's evidence. I should have kept the pistol, if I had been you, sir. To be sure, both you and I have seen it, and can swear to it, but there would have been nothing like the pistol itself to make everything sure."

"I suppose so," said Mr Hepburn, absently. "Baines, do you think it necessary—absolutely necessary—that this business should, after all, be gone into publicly?"

"Necessary, sir? Gone into publicly?" repeated the constable. "Why, to be sure, you wouldn't go to hush it up, sir?"

"Hum," said Mr Hepburn. "I am not quite clear about that. I don't see if Captain Gurdon was told about it, and Dr Thornton, and they were both satisfied—"

"Lord bless me, sir," ejaculated Baines, "you can't mean it, to be sure! When we've had all this trouble, and have brought home the case so beautiful at last, you can't think of letting it drop. Why, sir, what would the public say? What would the magistrates say? There's Colonel Wilder, sir, and Mr Knyvett too. It would be as much as my situation was worth! And besides," he muttered half inaudibly, "there's the reward offered, and there's that young jockey that led me that dance about the gipsy's clothes. He wants taking down a peg or two. I'll teach him to behave himself conformable before I've done with him. No, sir, this must come before the magistrates to-morrow."

"Very well, Baines, then you must bring it forward. I wish you good-night."

The constable withdrew accordingly to his own house, and Mr Hepburn slowly retraced his steps to the Priory.

"I have done that lad injustice," he reflected. "I wish I had understood him better. But I am afraid, if Baines is resolved to push this affair to the utmost, it may not be possible to extricate him from the difficulty in which he has involved himself."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### AYE, WHO INDEED!

"WHERE is Burton?" asked Dr Thornton, as the first class went up on the following morning to say their Homer lesson.

"He's unwell, sir," said Cressingham. "He called me into his room this morning as I was going by, and told me that he wanted his name placed upon the sick list. I don't think he was well all yesterday, and he said he'd lain awake all night."

"I daresay this sudden change in the weather has affected him," said the Doctor. "It was tolerably mild last night, but the frost is pretty sharp this morning. He had better stay in bed to-day, and we will send his dinner up to him. Here are the marks for this week's compositions, boys. I cannot forbear to remark on the excellence of Graves's essay on the character of Alcibiades, and Temple's Greek translation from Timon of Athens. I have awarded fifteen marks for each of the writers—the highest amount, I believe, I have given for any composition, for many years, at all events. Burton's Latin prose too, and Cressingham's elegiacs are good. The former has nine, and the latter eight marks for them. Now, Temple, if you please, begin to construe."

The lesson began, and proceeded much as usual for about an hour, when it was interrupted by the very unusual appearance of the school servant at the door. The surprise caused by Tom's appearance was increased by the look of stern solemnity which overspread his features, which awakened even the Doctor's curiosity. "Whatever is the matter, man?" he exclaimed.

"If you please, Dr Thornton," said Cobbe, in a sepulchral voice, which might have announced the doom of all present to immediate execution, "If you please, Dr Thornton, Colonel Wilder and Mr Harry are in the study, and Baines, the constable, is with them, and they desires to see you immediate."

"See me immediately," said Dr Thornton. "We have just done the lesson, or shall have done in ten minutes. Won't that do?"

"From the demeanour of the parties," returned Tom austerely, "I should fear that it would not. And that is not all, sir. Captain Gurdon, who arrived, as I may say, promiscuous with them, he's in the dining-room. He has two persons with him, as come, I am told, from Haverport; and one of them, too," added Tom, rising to his climax, "one of them, too, is a lawyer, and clerk to the magistrates."

The Doctor looked a good deal surprised, and still more annoyed. "Is there to be no end of this?" he muttered to himself. "Mr Hepburn, do you know anything of this?"

"I may guess something, sir," said the usher, "but I would rather not interfere."

"You say they want to see *me*," said the headmaster; "do they wish to see me only, or others also?"

"From what they told me," returned Cobbe, "Baines wishes to see all the young gentlemen, as he did last autumn."

"Very well," said the Doctor, "then it must be so. Boys, shut your books and take your places at your bureaus. Cobbe, show the party in here."

Tom departed, and presently returned, ushering in the six visitors. Dr Thornton shook hands with Colonel Wilder, Harry, and Captain Gurdon, and requested all to be seated. Then he said, "I conclude you have come here with the intention of preferring a charge against some one respecting the subject which has been engaging our attention for the last month or two—something, in fact, has come to light. If so, as a great deal has been said on the subject already, it would be better if the charge was made at once against the person supposed to be the guilty party."

Baines was about to speak, but Captain Gurdon pushed before him.

"Quite right, Thornton," he said, "quite right. I charge, then, yonder boy—Stephen Graves his name is—with having killed my dog, Neptune, on the night of the 18th of August last, and I have evidence here which will prove clearly that he committed the offence."

The headmaster looked grave, but did not seem much surprised. "You have *proof*, Gurdon, you say?"

"Certainly, Thornton. I shouldn't make the charge, if I hadn't."

"Very good," said the headmaster, "and you, I suppose, Baines, have come for the purpose of corroborating Captain Gurdon's evidence?"

"I, sir!" exclaimed the constable. "No, I haven't come

for any such purpose as that. I've come here to charge a different person altogether with it—Mr Charles Temple. I don't know what evidence Captain Gurdon may think he's got, but he's mistook, whatever it may be. Mr Temple's the one what did it, and he won't deny it, if you ask him—"

"Nonsense, Baines," broke in Captain Gurdon indignantly. "I know your dislike to that poor lad, and the efforts that have been made to fix the offence on him." He glanced angrily at Mr Hepburn as he spoke. "I am glad to see that he, at all events, says nothing. He is satisfied, no doubt, that my friend Charlie had nothing to do with it."

All eyes were turned upon Mr Hepburn, who answered coldly, "You had better not appeal to me, Captain Gurdon, I do not wish to say anything about this, and you'll not do wisely to oblige me to speak."

"This will not do," said Dr Thornton. "If there's to be an inquiry it cannot be made in this way. Captain Gurdon, as you spoke first, you had better make your charge and give your evidence. Of course, if that should prove, as you declare it to be, conclusive, it will save all further trouble. If it should not, the case against Temple can be gone into. Colonel Wilder and myself will hear both charges."

Captain Gurdon bowed. "I wish in the first place then to state," he said, "that one day in August last, a week or more before the dog was shot, there was a wager made between Graves and Temple as to which was the best shot with a pistol, and a day was fixed—Saturday, the 19th of August, when this match was to come off."

"Stop a minute," said the Doctor. "Before we go any further, I should like to inquire whether that statement is

admitted to be correct or not. Graves, Temple, did you agree to shoot such a match?"

He looked at the two boys. Graves made no answer, but Temple said, "We did, sir."

"Go on, Captain Gurdon."

"Graves was anxious to win," rejoined the Captain, "and in order to ensure doing so, he wrote home for a brace of pistols, which he had reason to believe were unusually good. In corroboration of this—"

"There is no reason for corroborating that assertion, Gurdon," said the headmaster, "I have proof of that. I sent the pistols back to Mr Lumley, expressing my surprise and regret that they should have been sent to Holmwood. He informed me in reply that they had been despatched without his knowledge on the 17th of August, by Graves's sister. You may proceed."

"Well, sir," resumed the Captain, "the pistols did not reach Walescliff till three or four o'clock on the morning of the 19th. Graves had once or twice sent up to the office for them. He had sent Cobbe, your servant, to the Anchor late in the afternoon of the 18th. Here is Cobbe himself, he can say whether that is correct or not. Did you go for the pistol case, Cobbe?"

"Begging your pardon, Captain Gurdon," said Tom, loftily. "I did not go to fetch no pistol case. I knows the duties of the station to which I am called better than that. I went to fetch a innocent box, which might contain paints, or sugar plums, or any such like—"

"That will do, Cobbe," interposed the Doctor. "Captain Gurdon did not mean to find fault with you."

"Well, sir," rejoined the old officer, "you will observe that the pistols did not arrive in any case before two or three o'clock in the morning, yet, if you remember, they were found in his possession in the forenoon of the next day. How did he get them? Let him explain if he can."

All present looked at Graves; but he remained as before, doggedly silent.

"Do you mean to explain, Graves?" asked Doctor Thornton.

"I mean to say nothing," was the answer.

"Your demeanour is strange," said the headmaster; "but still, Captain Gurdon, this will not prove your point. You mean of course that Graves went out early on the morning of the 19th; that the dog attacked him, and that he shot him with the pistols he had just received?"

"Just so, Doctor," assented the Captain.

"But you have to prove two things," rejoined the headmaster. "First, that he went out that morning; secondly, that while out he shot Neptune. You cannot assume either fact."

"I don't mean to do so. I have here the deposition of Hugh Gray, taken this morning by Mr John Smollett, solicitor's clerk, here present, which with your favour I will read out. It will determine one of the points to which you refer, if not both."

Every eye was turned upon Graves as these words were spoken. Even his iron nerve could not prevent his giving a slight start as he heard Hugh Gray's name.

"Hugh Gray states," said Captain Gurdon, "that on the afternoon of the 18th of August, he was engaged by a young

gentleman, whose name he has since ascertained to be Graves, and who is a pupil at this school here, to go to the coach-office at the Anchor at Walescliff, and ask for a small wooden case which was to come by the night coach, that he did go to the coach-office about half-past three o'clock in the morning, he believes, and took the case up to the Priory, where Mr Graves was waiting to receive it—"

"Waiting," repeated Dr Thornton. "Where?"

"He was inside the gate, looking through the small slit in it. Mr Graves called him to fetch a ladder, which was standing against a barn hard by, because the box was too large to be passed through the opening in the gate. Hugh did place it, and mounted to the top of the wall and then helped Mr Graves up—"

"Helped Mr Graves up," again repeated the Doctor.

"Yes, sir. I can produce plenty of proof that though it is impossible to clamber up the wall on the outside, it is not difficult to do so on the inside with a little help."

"As soon as Mr Graves was on the top of the wall," resumed Captain Gurdon, "he took the pistol case and paid the money; and Hugh began descending the ladder, but his foot slipped and he fell off, hurting himself severely. He was unable to rise, and Graves was obliged to descend the ladder and help him. He says, he believes Graves carried him to the barn and laid him on some straw; but he was light-headed and can remember nothing clearly till he found himself being lifted into a carrier's cart, when he again relapsed into half-consciousness; but he distinctly remembers hearing soon afterwards the angry barking of a dog, and a pistol shot which followed. This deposition, sir, was taken down, verbatim, in

my hearing. I should wish to ask whether the person whom it inculpates—Stephen Graves—denies its accuracy."

"You hear, Graves," said Dr Thornton, "you will surely give some answer to Captain Gurdon's appeal."

"I have already said I don't mean to say anything more," returned Graves.

"I am sorry to hear it. I cannot disguise that your silence must needs prejudice your case. Well, Captain Gurdon, have you anything more to say."

"Only that I wish you would yourselves examine the carrier. He will tell his own story."

"Very well. Mr Giles, what have you to tell us?"

"Only, sir, that on the morning of the day, Captain Gurdon speaks of, the 19th of August—"

"How do you know that was the day?"

"It was a Saturday. I always drives my cart from Walescliff to Haverport every Saturday during the summer months. Saturday, August 19th, was the last day on which I made the journey this year. I was very early that day, as I wanted to get home. It wanted ten or twelve minutes to four when I was passing under the wall of Dr Thornton's house. I heard some one calling to me, and saw this young gentleman, whose name you say is Graves. He told me that there was a lad hurt by a fall, and that he believed he lived at Trawler's Gate. 'Did I know the place?'

"I told him I knew the place and the lad too—it was Hugh Gray, and I should pass not above a hundred yards from his father's cottage. 'Very well,' says he, 'then you'd better take him home, and here's half-a-crown to pay his fare.' I agreed, and we lifted the boy into the cart and laid him on some

sacks. Then he points out a ladder which was resting against the wall of the house, and tells me it was to be put back into the barn as soon as he'd got up. Then he gives me the half-crown—he paid me all fair, I must say that—and mounts the ladder, and stood on the top of the wall watching me while I put the ladder back. That was the last I saw of him until this morning."

"Have you any doubt that Mr Graves is the gentleman you saw?" asked Colonel Wilder, who had not spoken before.

"No, Colonel, no doubt at all. I'd swear to him at 'sizes if I was asked."

"Very well. Did you see or hear anything more connected with this matter?"

"About a minute or two after I had turned the corner of the road beyond the house, I heard a big dog bark, and then a shot fired."

"That was a minute or two after you had parted from Mr Graves?"

"Well, I parted with him when I moved the ladder, but I saw him on the top of the wall as the cart started. It might be two or three minutes after I lost sight of him before I heard the shot."

"You have nothing more to add?" asked Dr Thornton.

"Nothing more, sir."

"Graves," said the headmaster, "if you are still so unwise as to refuse to speak, it cannot be helped. But it is my duty to inquire whether you mean to put any questions to this man. If you do not, I must assume that you allow his evidence to be true."

This time Graves made no response at all.

"Well, sir," said Captain Gurdon after a short pause, "I presume you will now allow that the case is clear against Graves."

"I should like to say a few words to my brother magistrate before giving any opinion," answered Dr Thornton.

Colonel Wilder and the Doctor conferred apart for a few minutes. Then the latter spoke again.

"Putting together all the evidence we have heard to-day, together with that which was adduced on the former occasion, Colonel Wilder and myself are of opinion that it amounts to moral proof against Graves, though it may be that a jury would hesitate to convict him. There is the fact that Neptune was certainly loose in the courtyard at the time when Giles saw him on the top of the wall just about to get down into it, and just before the shot was fired: that the dog bore a notorious dislike to Graves, and that Graves had expressed his intention of shooting him, if he ever attacked him: there is the tear in Graves' trousers; and lastly, Cobbe's statement that he saw Graves pass the window, with a pistol open in his hand, only a minute or two after the report was heard. This appears to us very strong, if not absolutely conclusive evidence. To this must be added the fact that Graves refused to explain any of the suspicious circumstances, or to challenge in any way the testimony of the witnesses. I consider what has been brought forward quite sufficient to justify me in acting upon it, and mean to do so. But before saying how I mean to deal with Graves's case, I must hear Baines—that is, unless what has been now alleged induces him to withdraw his charge against Temple. How is that, Baines?"

"I don't consider that anything the Captain has stated alters the case, sir. I say again, he's mistaken, and I can prove it."

"Very well. Go on with your proof then."

"I wish to say in the first place," said the constable, "that on the morning of the 19th of August a search was made for the pistol with which the dog had been shot, and it was believed that it couldn't be found. That was a mistake. The pistol was picked up by Mr Hepburn in a patch of long grass, very near the place where the body of the dog was found."

"It was!" exclaimed Captain Gurdon. "Why has nothing been said about it then?"

"We had our reasons, Capting. The pistol found had been lately discharged. I made inquiries in all directions, to find out to whom it belonged. I asked Colonel Wilder among others ——"

"Certainly you did," said the Colonel, "but I had no such pistol, as you described, in my possession, and never had had one."

"*You* hadn't, Colonel; but your friend Colonel M'Grath left a brace in Mr Harry's charge. They were rather old-fashioned, though I daresay very good articles. They had a lot of Indian carved work about the stocks and the letters M. M'G.——"

"I remember them perfectly," exclaimed Colonel Wilder. "Did M'Grath leave them in your charge, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," answered his son in a low tone.

"Well, Dr Thornton," pursued Baines. "The Capting has said truly that there was a pistol match got up between the young gentlemen, and I daresay Mr Graves wrote home for

some pistols to shoot it with. But Mr Temple, he wanted a pistol for the purpose too, and he borrowed his'n' of Mr Harry, there."

"It was brought up late at night," resumed the constable; "late on Friday night. Mr Temple, he went out, after the house was locked, to fetch it. The dog followed him out—"

"Wait a little," interrupted Dr Thornton, "we are getting on too fast by a good deal. First of all, Mr Harry Wilder, did Temple borrow the pistol of you, and did you bring it up to Holmwood late at night?"

"I will spare Harry the pain of answering the question," said Temple. "I did borrow the pistol. I only am to blame, so far. Harry did not bring it up to the house at all. I left it outside in the shrubbery when I came in just before supper. I was afraid some one would see it if I brought it in with me. I meant to go out and fetch it in afterwards."

"How could you do that," asked the headmaster, "after the house had been locked up?"

Temple made no answer.

"Speak, Temple, I insist. There is some strange mystery here. If you want to be believed, keep nothing back. Will you explain this?"

"I would rather say no more, sir."

"That was, if I remember right, exactly your answer when you were first questioned, and you denied all knowledge of the death of the dog. But now ——"

"If you'd forgive me for interrupting you, sir," broke in Baines, "I can explain the difficulty. There's a bar loose in one of the school-room windows, by which Mr Temple got out of the house—he'll not deny that ——"

"In the school-room?" exclaimed the Doctor; "in the hall they told me ——"

"Ah, that was a different matter, said the constable, "that was an accident. One of the stanchions had got rusty, and a chance blow had knocked it out. The bar in the school is different. The screws have been taken in and out of that a good many times, I judge. Mr Temple, I say, won't deny that ——"

Dr Thornton glanced at the boy named, and saw that indeed he could not deny it.

"I am sorry for this," he said, "but still matters are not explained now. The loose bar will account for Temple's having been able to get out of the house, but not for his getting out into the shrubbery, whither, however, he must have gone, if he did shoot the blood-hound as you suppose."

"I couldn't have explained that till last night, sir. But last night I learned--what, I'll wager, neither you nor any of your ushers knows—that there's a secret way out from one of the old wash-houses in the servants' court, through the wall into the shrubbery. I see Mr Temple go out that way with my own eyes last night. That's the way he used to get out, I s'pose, years back, when we couldn't make out how he managed to pay his visits at night to the billiard-room—that's the way he went out on the night of the 18th of August last to fetch the pistol in. The dog followed him—didn't know him in the dark, and flew at him. The young gentleman didn't want to hurt the dog, I don't doubt. But he was flustered and mayhap frightened, for that there brute wasn't a pleasant one to fight with. Anyhow, Mr Temple ups with his pistol, and shoots him through the heart—that's my view of the job, anyway."

"You've said nothing about the missing pair of trousers," remarked the Doctor.

"No, sir, because I found there was nothing in that. I lit on Mrs Meggots one day about six weeks ago. She said she had lent the young gent the clothes, and had taken a pair of his trousers as a security for them, as he had no money. But Mr Temple never brought the clothes back, so she'd sold them."

"Well, Dr Thornton," said Captain Gurdon, "I don't know how you may take this, but for my part, I can't see that Baines has made out nearly such a good case against Temple as I shewed you against Graves. Just look at the difference betwixt the two; Graves disliked my dog, and was heard to threaten to shoot him only a day or two before this happened. Temple was always very kind to him, and I won't believe he would do anything to hurt him."

Temple looked up for the first time, and cast a glance of gratitude at the Captain, who went on.

"Then the dog was as fond of Temple as he was of the dog. The lad would never have hurt him, and he'd never have attacked the lad. But Nep knew his enemies, as a dog always does, and it's likely enough if he met Graves at that hour in the morning, he'd fly at him, especially if Graves spoke to him crossly, as I can prove he often did. Then, again, about this getting out. Baines says, there's a way of getting out of the school-room, and another of getting through some passage or other through the wall, and he can prove that Temple got out that way on one occasion. But neither he nor anyone else saw or can prove that Temple got out that way on the night when Neptune was killed, or that he

got out at all that night. On the other hand, it's been proved as clear as the day, that Graves *was* out, was seen out by more than one person, just about the time the dog was shot. Baines makes a good deal of Temple having borrowed the pistol to shoot this match. I take it the two boys stand in the same predicament so far as that's concerned. They both got their pistols for the same purpose. But Graves's pistols, it is said, hadn't been fired, and Temple's had. Well, it's been shewn already, there was plenty of time between four o'clock and ten for Graves to have cleaned his pistol, even if he had fired it. But who knows that he didn't shoot the dog after all with Temple's pistol. It had been left lying outside most likely, left ready loaded, as boys are apt to leave their pistols."

"Was the pistol you lent to Temple, loaded, Harry?" asked Colonel Wilder of his son.

"Yes, sir, it was," said Harry. "I had brought it loaded, because Temple wanted to try it before taking it up to Holmwood. But there wasn't time, and he took it away with him almost immediately after we met."

"I thought as much," said the Captain. "Well, then, why shouldn't Graves have seen the pistol lie upon the ground, and when the dog attacked him, caught it up and shot him with it? What do you say to that, Baines?"

"I say that you've taken no notice, sir, of the fact that Mr Temple tried to get out of the house late that night, and that he can't deny that he did go out that night."

"Captain Gurdon glanced at Temple. "I didn't hear that," he said, "and I don't know it now. Can't you say that you didn't go out that night, Charlie?" he asked.

Temple made no reply.

There was a pause, and then Colonel Wilder said, "I conclude we have now heard all. Thornton, will you step aside with me somewhere for a few minutes. I should like to consult with you before we come to any determination."

The two magistrates accordingly retired into the Doctor's study, and were absent nearly half an hour. During this interval, the boys kept their places and conversed together in low tones. Graves leaned, hardy and defiant, with folded arms against his bureau. Depressed and downcast, Temple sat at his desk with his face buried in his hands. Cobbe took the opportunity of moving up unnoticed to the place where Cressingham was standing, and slipped a note into his hand.

"I promised to give you this, sir, on the first opportunity," he whispered.

Cressingham took it mechanically, but he was too deeply absorbed by what he had just been hearing to pay much heed to it. Presently the door opened, the two magistrates reappeared and took their seats. All present leaned eagerly forward to hear what they would say.

"Colonel Wilder and myself have considered this matter most carefully," said the Doctor, "and we are agreed that it's impossible to come to any decision on the information now before us. It is a singular fact that the case against either boy might be held conclusive, and probably would be held so in any court of justice, if it were not for the case against the other. We have no choice but to adjourn the inquiry. It is possible that some evidence may be forthcoming which will determine the matter. It is also possible—I trust, I may add, it is likely—that the real offender will, on consideration, have

the grace to confess his guilt, and relieve his school-fellow from the undeserved opprobrium now attaching to him. Temple and Graves must remain close prisoners in their rooms for the next twenty-four hours, when Colonel Wilder and myself will resume the inquiry. In the meanwhile, all possible efforts will be made to obtain further evidence. Boys, you had better go into the play-ground. Afternoon school will be as usual."

The assembly slowly dispersed, the boys unusually silent and thoughtful. Their elders were to the full as much perplexed. Even the veteran Colonel Wilder muttered to himself, as he left the house on his way homeward, "I never knew such a puzzle as this! I would give twenty pounds to the fellow who would tell me, 'Who did it?'"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A STRANGE RESOLVE.

CRESSINGHAM walked out into the play-ground, as much wrapt in thought as any of his companions. He had entirely forgotten the note put into his hand, and was only reminded of it a quarter of an hour afterwards by Tom Cobbe; who came up to him as he was leaning against one corner of the play-ground wall, and said, "I beg your pardon, Mr Cressingham, but ain't there no answer to Mr Burton's note?"

Cressingham started. "Mr Burton's note," he repeated; "oh, what you gave me in the school-room, I suppose; I had quite forgotten it."

He opened it as he spoke, and ran his eye hastily through it. It contained an urgent request from his friend to go to him immediately.

"Tell him I'll come at once," he said, "if I can get permission."

He applied accordingly to Mr Wilkes, but received for answer the information that Dr Thornton had gone out, but had left strict orders that no one was to go up to the boys' bed-rooms on any account during his absence.

"But that refers to Graves and Temple, sir, does it not?'

said Cressingham. "I don't want to see either of them. It is Burton, sir. He is ill, and he has sent a message to say he wants me to come to him."

"I'm afraid I can't help that, Cressingham," said the usher. "It is very probable that you may be right, but the orders are positive not to allow any one to go up to the bed-rooms at all. But I daresay the Doctor won't be long. Meanwhile," he added, good-naturedly, "I will go up to Burton myself, and if he wants anything I can get him, or there's any message he wants delivered to you, I can manage it."

Mr Wilkes did not return to the school-room before dinner time, and the Doctor's absence from home lasted until afternoon school had begun, when he hurried in just in time to take his class. At four o'clock, however, Mr Wilkes called up Cressingham.

"I have seen Dr Thornton," he said, "and have got leave for you to go up to Burton. It was well I caught him, for he's going over immediately to Trawler's Gate. After that he's engaged, he tells me, to dine at Lord Wandesborough's, where he is to sleep. Probably he will not be back again before morning school to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir," said Cressingham; "then I may go up to Clement immediately?"

"You may," said the usher. "But I should warn you that your friend is in a very anxious and excited state. He would hear all that had taken place in the school this morning. I told him it was very bad for him to excite himself so, and he had better wait to hear about it until he was better. But like all invalids, he was fretful and unreasonable, and would hear everything. I thought it better to tell him than to leave him

to fidget himself about it. But the less you say to him the better. I shall ask Dr Everard to give him a composing draught to-night, and a good night's rest will probably do him a world of good."

Cressingham hastened upstairs accordingly, and passing the closely-locked doors of the rooms where the two suspects were confined, entered Burton's chamber. He found his friend pacing up and down its narrow dimensions, like a wild beast in a cage. "Oh, Fred!" he exclaimed, as the latter entered, "where have you been all this time? I didn't think you'd have forgotten me in this way."

"I'm very sorry, Clem, I am sure, but I've only just this moment obtained leave to come up to you."

"Have you got any letter for me? Was there any letter by this afternoon's post? It must have been in half-an-hour."

"I don't think the letters had been brought in when I left the play-ground," said Cressingham. "I was some time talking to Wilkes. But I'll go down and ask Cobbe."

He went accordingly, and returned in a few minutes with the information that the letters had arrived a quarter of an hour ago, but there was nothing for Burton.

"Nothing," exclaimed Burton, in a tone of the greatest distress; "are you quite sure, Fred? Oh, whatever shall I do?"

"Whatever is the matter, Clem?" exclaimed Cressingham, beginning to be apprehensive that his friend was seriously ill. "As for the letters, there's certainly no mistake. There were but two—I asked Cobbe myself—and they were both for Dr Thornton."

"For Dr Thornton? Was one of them from Wickfield?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Cressingham, still more astonished at his companion's tone. "I don't suppose Cobbe noticed the post-marks. At all events he didn't tell me anything about them."

"Go and ask him—please go and ask him—please go and ask him at once!" cried Burton.

"Clem, my dear fellow, don't excite yourself in this way," said Cressingham. "You'll make yourself ill—worse than you are."

"I'm not ill in body, Fred. You mistake altogether. Please go and ask Cobbe if the post-mark of one of the letters was Wickfield, and then ask if I can see the Doctor at once."

Cressingham hesitated, but it seemed the wisest course to go and ask the question of the school servant. If Burton obtained the information he wanted, he might be quieted by it; if he did not, in all likelihood he would continue to worry himself. He descended the stairs accordingly a second time, and presently reappeared.

"Cobbe did not notice the post-mark on either letter," he reported. "I am sorry to say you cannot see the Doctor. He went out again a quarter of an hour ago."

"When will he return?" asked Burton. "Did you ask if I could see him as soon as he came in?"

"He won't be in again at all to-day," returned Cressingham.

"You don't mean that! You can't mean that!" cried his school-fellow. "Oh, Fred, this is not kind of you."

"I assure you I'm telling you the simple fact," said Cressingham, earnestly. "The Doctor is engaged to dine and sleep at Wandesborough Castle to-night, and probably won't return before morning school to-morrow. Mr Wilkes distinctly told me so."

"Morning school to-morrow," repeated Burton. "And this inquiry—about Temple and Graves, I mean—when is that to be resumed?"

"The inquiry about the dog?" said Cressingham. "Oh, I suppose at twelve o'clock to-morrow. That's what Thornton said this morning, if I remember right."

"Twelve o'clock," exclaimed Burton. "What is the time now?"

"Ten minutes past four," returned Cressingham, consulting his watch.

"Ah, too late for the afternoon post. What is to be done?"

There was silence for some minutes. Cressingham looked anxiously at his friend, whose appearance and demeanour, so different from the common, bewildered and alarmed him. Burton sat lost in thought. At last he spoke, but in quite a different tone. "Fred, old fellow, you and I have been friends for a great many years."

"Yes, Clem," responded Cressingham, "and I hope we always shall be so."

"Thank you. And I think you can trust me to speak the truth."

"If I couldn't trust you, I couldn't trust any one," was the answer.

"Thank you once more. Well, then, I have something to tell you. I am in a terrible fix. I can't explain to you what it is, because it's another fellow's secret, and I have promised to keep it. You understand that's my only reason for not telling you."

"All right, Clem, go on."

"I must get an answer from—from a person at Wickfield; get an answer before twelve to-morrow. The post, you see, is gone. Indeed, I question whether I could have got an answer that way, even if it hadn't. Can you think of any one who can take a note over there and bring a reply?"

Cressingham pondered awhile. "James Gunn might do it perhaps," he said, "but I'm afraid the chances are that he'll have gone over to Haverport with his boat. He said yesterday he was going, and very likely old Gunn will go with him. Of course, Cobbe couldn't be spared. And besides, I suppose you wouldn't want this matter mentioned, Clem?"

"No, no, of course not," said Burton, nervously.

"Then really, Clem, I'm afraid I can't think of any one. If one could get out and go down into Walescliff, somebody might be found, I daresay, though even then there'd be a difficulty about their saying nothing about the matter; but one couldn't get leave to go down into Walescliff without saying what one wanted to go down for."

"I thought so," said Burton. "Well, then, Fred, there's only one thing for it—I must go to Wickfield myself."

"What!" exclaimed Cressingham, "go to Wickfield? You? When must you go, and how?"

"Now—this very night," returned Burton, "on my own legs, I suppose."

Cressingham stared at him as though he thought his friend had lost his senses.

"My dear fellow," he said at last, "something has upset you altogether. You had better go to bed and get a good night's rest. Then you'll be able to judge of this matter better ——"

"It would be no use judging the matter to-morrow. I must have an answer from Wickfield before twelve o'clock."

"Before twelve—twelve to-morrow, that is—when the Doctor is going to inquire into this matter of Graves's and Temple's again? Clem, I don't want to pry into your secrets, but I can't help fancying it has some connection with that business."

"Well, Fred, it has. I must admit it, though I would not do so if I could help it."

"You know which of these two fellows did it, and you have the means of proving it, but you must bring some one from Wickfield for the purpose, is that it? Or can it possibly be?" he added, as a number of circumstances presented themselves suddenly to his recollection—Burton's suppression of Temple's knowledge of the secret passage, and of his attempt to go out of the house on the 18th, his determination not to believe him guilty of Neptune's death, and his apparent connivance in Temple's outstripping him in the competition for the Hawley prize—"can it possibly be that you yourself—I beg your pardon, Clem, I ought not for a moment to have fancied such a thing ——"

"It was not very friendly, I must say that, Fred," rejoined Burton, somewhat reproachfully. "Please say no more about that."

"No, I won't, I did not really mean it. You might have done it, Clem, of course. Any one of us might have done it. But I know quite well that if by any unlucky chance you had killed poor Nep, you would instantly have owned it. You would have told all you knew—told everything ——"

"Pray stop, Fred," interposed Burton, hastily. "There

is no good in saying that, even if it were all true. The only thing there is any good in considering is, whether you will help me or not."

"Help you! You may be sure I will help you to the utmost of my ability. But in order to do so to any purpose, I must quite understand what you want. You want a letter to be brought from Wickfield—from George Alford, I suppose. You have been in correspondence with him—haven't you—all this autumn?"

"With George Alford!" repeated Burton in great surprise; "George Alford has been absent from Wickfield for months past—ever since August last. Did not you know that? I thought every one knew it!"

"What, I suppose he could not put up with that Wilcoxon any longer! Well, I don't wonder at that. But, Clem, he had not left Wickfield when you told me all about him—that day, you know, when we were at Hanger's Cave ——"

"No," answered the other shortly. "He had not left Wickfield then."

"And where is he now?"

"I don't know," returned Burton. "I wish I did."

"Then who is the person from whom you want to get an answer?"

"Frank Knyvett," said Clement.

"Frank Knyvett! What, the son of old Knyvett, the lawyer? I know him a little. He has been over here once or twice. But what can he have to do with this business?"

"You mustn't question me, Fred. I can't answer you."

"Well, Clem," said Cressingham, after a few moments of reflection, "the whole thing is a puzzle to me. But, after all,

it does not signify who the person may be to whom you wish to write. I'll do the best I can for you. See here. I'll go to Tom Cobbe, and get him to go the first thing in the morning to old Gunn's cottage. If we give him half-a-crown, he'll get up half an hour earlier than usual. Then James Gunn will take your note immediately over to Mr Knyvett's, get an answer, and be back here before twelve, I daresay."

"It would not be possible, Fred," answered Burton. "I know exactly how long it takes to go to Wickfield. When I first came here I often went over there during the holidays, and generally as fast as it was possible to go. You can't reach Friarswood Ferry under two hours, unless you are on horseback. Then it takes a good three-quarters of an hour to cross—it averages quite that—and it is another hour on to Wickfield. If Jem set out at six in the morning—and I'm pretty sure Tom wouldn't be persuaded to go down to the cottage so early as that—he couldn't reach Wickfield before ten. Then he would have to find Frank, who might be at home, or gone up to his office, or, it might be, engaged in business somewhere else; and an answer would have to be written and brought back. If James returned by two o'clock, it would be as early as I should expect him. And by that time the inquiry would in all probability be over. It would be useless sending a note in that manner. There is only one thing for it, as I said before. I must go over to Wickfield myself."

"But, Clem, how could you manage it?"

"I should slip out at the gate, just before locking up time. That is a little before six. I should then run down to the shore by the back lane and across Speneleigh Wood, and so

by the Ferry. I should reach Wickfield before ten, I expect. I could sleep there to-night, and start by the early coach which leaves the town at six and passes by this house at seven, or a quarter-past. I could then slip in and go to bed, before Mother Edwards came to my room in the morning. I don't wonder at your looking like that, Fred. I know you must think this very wrong of me. I daresay it is. But I can't help it, Fred—I *can't* help it. Won't you believe me, Fred, I can't help it?"

"My dear old fellow," said Cressingham, much moved. "I believe you, with all my heart and soul. I can't understand it, but you are, I know, doing what you believe to be right. But see here, Clem, I can improve on your plan. I'll slip out at six this evening instead of you, and carry your note to James Gunn. I've no doubt he'll start with it at once; or if he can't go, Jack Landy from the Anchor will ride his pony over, and be back by ten o'clock. He can send or bring the answer up in the morning. That will be better than your going out, ill as you are, this bitter night. It has been freezing sharp all day—"

"I am not ill, Fred. I told you so before. It is this business that frets and troubles me, or I should be well enough. I don't see why you are to run the risk of getting into trouble on my account. But I'll take your advice, so far as to write the note and carry it down to Gunn's cottage, or, failing that, to the Anchor."

"And if neither Gunn nor Landy can go?" suggested Cressingham.

"I shall go myself," was the prompt rejoinder.

"Then I shall certainly go with you to see you off."

Burton tried to combat this resolution, but in vain. Cressingham represented that, as he had obtained leave to pass the evening with Burton, he would not be missed any more than Burton himself, and if they made haste, they would both be back before the gate was locked. As it now wanted only a quarter to six, there was no time to argue the question, and they prepared to start. Their great-coats were kept in their bedrooms—there was no difficulty therefore about them; and Cressingham suggested that they should wear their thick boating caps instead of hats.

"They'll be warmer," he said, "than the chimney-pots, and we might have some difficulty in getting those, as we should have to carry them through the schoolroom. We can slip the caps into the pockets of our great-coats, and not put them on till we are clear of the house. Now, then, Clem, you had better let me go down stairs and watch till the fellows have gone in to supper. Then the passages will be clear for ten minutes or so, and we can get out of the house without being seen."

Burton assented to all the arrangements without objection; the fever of anxiety, which had possessed him all day, had completely exhausted him, and he was glad to put himself into his friend's hands. Cressingham managed his share of the business cleverly. He got behind a cupboard door, whence he watched Cobbe and the women servants carrying in mugs and plates, and afterwards trays of bread, tea-pots, and jugs of milk. Presently there came the supper-bell, and the clatter of feet from the schoolroom, and the noise of the boys taking their places at the tables. As soon as this latter had subsided, Cressingham crept upstairs and fetched his

companion down. He noticed the dull listless air with which he followed him across the court-yard and out at the front gate, and was satisfied he had done wisely in not allowing him to venture alone.

The lane leading to Walescliff seemed to be quite deserted. Not a single person was in sight. The boys skimmed lightly over the frosty ground, and in a little more than ten minutes reached Gunn's cottage. Here they encountered their first *contretemps*. The cottage was shut up. It was too early for old Gunn to have gone to bed. But the outer door was locked, and they knocked several times in vain. "Old Gunn and Jem must be out somewhere," said Cressingham, "that's a bore, but it can't be helped. I suppose you wish us to go on to the 'Anchor,' Clem?"

"Yes, if you please," was the answer. They went on accordingly. But here, too, disappointment awaited them. Jack Landy had gone out with his carriage to take a gentleman to Wandesborough Castle, and wouldn't return till quite late—past twelve it might be, and the horse would be too tired to go out again, the landlord thought.

"That's unlucky, Clem," said Cressingham, "I really don't know what's to be done now."

"There's nothing for it but for me to go by myself," said Burton, rousing himself, "as I told you I meant to do, at the first."

"You must not attempt it, indeed you must not," expostulated Cressingham; "you are not fit to do it. I don't know what the consequences may be, if you persist in it."

"I *must* go, I tell you," said Burton. "It is no use talking. Go back, Fred, and say nothing about this."

"I shan't do that anyway," said Cressingham. "If one of us must go, let it be me. I am well and strong, it won't hurt me, though it will you."

"I can't help it, Fred, I tell you. This is my business and no one's else, and I can't let any one take my work and my responsibility. Good-night, Fred, go back at once, there's a good fellow."

"Flatly, I won't do that, then. If you persist in going, I shall go with you. I am quite as determined as you are."

"Very well, then, you must come," rejoined Burton, "I can't prevent your coming, any more than you can prevent my going; and I can't hang about here any longer."

He set off at a round pace as he spoke, followed by his companion. The moon was clear and bright, though along the edge of the horizon there were masses of heavy clouds slowly creeping up. The air too was certainly not so sharp as it had been an hour or two before, and the two boys were soon in a glow. They passed along the narrow path leading along the shore of the harbour, until they reached the stile, where the footpath turned off through Speneleigh Wood. The boys knew the way tolerably well, having more than once made excursions to the "Royal Oak," and the moon gave light enough to allow them to see the path clearly. It was pleasant enough in the clear cold air and the bright moonshine, with the healthy glow produced by exercise pervading their frames.

Notwithstanding this improvement in their prospects, Cressingham resolved to make one last effort to prevent Burton from persisting in the expedition. Close to Speneleigh stile was the residence of Captain Grimes, the harbour-master,

whose name has occurred several times already in these pages. He was a good-tempered old man, and a favourite with the boys, whom he would sometimes take out for a sail in his large boat, or a few hours fishing. He had a rough forest pony, which was used for a variety of purposes—sometimes drawing Mrs Grimes, who was an invalid, in a garden chair; sometimes carrying the Captain himself when he wanted to go a longer distance than he was inclined to walk; sometimes drawing a small cart, which was sent over to Horncombe or Haverport for coals or groceries. If the Captain could be induced to lend this pony, and send his boy on it with the note to Wickfield, all might yet be well. They might still be back before seven o'clock, and so slip into the house before the outer gate was locked.

Cressingham accordingly halted when they had surmounted the stile, and proposed going up to Grimes's house and asking for the loan of the pony. Burton did not receive the suggestion favourably. He was in a state of excitement, aggravated by the recent disappointments, which rendered him unusually perverse and uncomplying.

"Grimes wouldn't lend us his pony," he said. "He never likes lending it. He refused to lend it to Wilkes and M'Donald yesterday. They wanted it and the cart to take some of the things to the Royal Oak."

"I don't wonder at his refusing that," remarked Cressingham. "I wouldn't lend a pony to go on a party with some of our juniors. But Grimes might lend it to us to ride to Wickfield—"

"Wickfield?" said a voice close to them; "are you gentlemen thinking of going to Wickfield to-night?"

The boys faced quickly round, and perceived that the speaker was Grimes himself, who, with his pipe in his mouth, was strolling homewards.

"Yes, Captain, we are obliged to go there or send a letter to-night. Can you help us?" returned Cressingham.

"Only by advising you to go back to Holmwood and wait till to-morrow, Mr Cressingham. And did I hear you say anything about *riding*—riding through Speneleigh Wood? Why, a horse couldn't keep his feet with the path in the state it's in now, any more than he could on a boy's slide. You had better go back, young gentlemen—indeed, you had. There's a slight thaw beginning, and the roads are worse then than at any other time."

"We must go, Captain," said Burton. "Much obliged to you all the same. Good night." And before the worthy harbour-master could commence a fresh remonstrance, the boys were almost out of hearing.

"He won't send up to the Priory, will he?" suggested Cressingham, "and say that he has met us."

"I don't think he will," returned Burton. "I have never known him do anything of the kind. But if he does I should not very greatly care, except on your account, Fred. Let me reach Wickfield, and see Frank Knyvett, and I don't much care what happens."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE GREEN HOLM.

HURRYING on to make up, so far as was possible, for lost time, the boys reached the Royal Oak in a few minutes under the hour and a quarter. Here they sat down for a few minutes on the bench in front of the inn to rest their feet, which ached somewhat in consequence of the rapid pace at which they had walked. They were not more than half-way to Wickfield, but Cressingham's fears lest his companion should break down on the way were now quieted. It was plain he had been right in saying his ailment was not bodily illness, but worry and alarm. It was now a little more than two miles to Friarswood Ferry, and Cressingham reckoned that if they kept up the same speed as hitherto, they would reach it by half-past eight o'clock.

In a few minutes they again started, and in another quarter of an hour saw before them the estuary of the Spene. The clouds had been gathering for some time past, and the moon, hitherto bright and clear, was now occasionally obscured. By the time when they had reached the shore some heavy clouds were passing, and it was with difficulty that they could find the ferryman's house. The old man too was hard to rouse, and when they had succeeded in coming to a parley with him,

his first words expressed his astonishment at the request made of him.

"Cross the ferry, young gentlemen!" he said, "cross it now! Why, there's a sheet of ice over it thick enough to bear a horse pretty nigh. Folk have been crossing all the afternoon. It may break up before morning, but the boat won't be able to cross to-morrow, nor the day after neither."

"Do you say that people have been crossing this evening?" asked Burton.

"I don't know when the last went over," said the ferryman. "Hoskins, the pedlar, with his pack—he was the last I saw. He went across about half-past five o'clock—three hours ago."

"If he could get across, so can we," said Burton. "Good evening, ferryman. Come along, Fred."

"Wait a minute, Clem," said Cressingham. "You had better not attempt this without knowing a little more about it. Old Ball said the frost might be breaking up, and it feels to me very much as though it were giving. It's a long way across, and I know there are places where the ice is much thinner than in others. Hallo, Ball!" he shouted, "did you say the frost was breaking up?"

The old man put his head out of the window again. "Seems like it," he said, "but can't be sure."

"Is it safe to cross, do you think?"

"Depends on whether you're in a hurry," said the ferryman. "If you aint, you'd best come back and see how 'tis in the morning."

"Yes, but we are—we are," exclaimed Burton, impatiently.

"Well then, you'd best cross by the island. It's a bit longer, but the ice is stronger there. But I must go to bed

again. The missus don't like the window being kep open." So saying, Mr Ball shut the window down, and again buried himself beneath the bed-clothes.

"Clem, hadn't we better stay here for a few hours at all events?" urged Cressingham. "Ball will let us stay at his house, I've no doubt. It will make no difference at what hour we reach Wickfield, so that we're in time for you to get your answer from your friend and return to Walescliff by the morning coach. Another hour or two—"

"No, no," broke in Burton, "in another hour or two it may be impossible to cross. The moon is out now, and will be out for the next quarter of an hour at least, and that will give us time to see our way across. But don't you come, Cressingham, if you'd rather not—"

"If you go, I shall," interrupted Cressingham; "that's settled."

Nothing further was said. Picking up a short thick stick, several of which were lying about, Burton moved down to the point indicated by the ferryman, and stepped upon the ice.

The island has already been described in an earlier chapter. It lay in the middle of the estuary of the Spene—a long narrow strip of land covered with shrubs in the centre, and fringed with long reeds and rushes, whence it derived its name of the "Green Holm." It was a favourite place during the summer months for excursionists, who were wont to row over from Wickfield or Loggington, or sometimes from Walescliff and the towns further out in that direction, and pic-nic there. There was a rude hut immediately adjoining a spring of fresh water at the furthest point of the island. Close to this also was the landing place. The cottage itself was kept

in repair by the lord of the manor, Squire Wolford; and during the summer season so many parties were wont to visit the spot, that Mrs Ball made a regular practice of migrating to it early in June, and continuing her residence till late in September, picking up a very considerable harvest of sixpences and shillings from the parties whom she supplied with glass, crockery, and hot water. If any complaints were made by visitors, she was happily fenced from hearing them, being almost stone deaf—unable, at all events, by any effort to catch the purport of the remarks addressed to her. On these occasions her husband was usually called in as the medium of communication. But as he too, if not absolutely deaf, was extremely hard of hearing, visitors generally found it wiser to take the goods with which the gods provided them, without any attempt at remonstrance.

Burton stepped out stoutly, making for the point recommended by Ball. The ice seemed solid and firm under his feet, and he moved rapidly, though cautiously, onward. But he had miscalculated the time during which the moon would remain clear of cloud. The wind had freshened somewhat, and the heavy dark masses kept sweeping up faster than before. The two boys were still a hundred yards from the shore of the island when the light failed them. In another minute it was impossible to see any object within the distance of a few yards. They moved on now very slowly, holding each other's hands, and feeling their way with their sticks.

"We had better stop, Fred," said Burton, presently. "I'm afraid we must be going wrong. We were not above a hundred yards from the island, when that cloud came over the moon.

"CRESSINGHAM COULD SEE HIM STRUGGLING."

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I've been counting the steps I have taken, and we ought to have reached it before this."

"It will be no use standing still, Clem," answered his friend. "I noticed there was a long chain of black clouds, one after another, coming up. It would take a very long time before they all go by. We must keep moving. Even if we have missed the end of the island, we must be going right for the Wickfield shore. Hallo! what's that, Clem? what's the matter?" he cried, as Burton let go his hand, and the sound of a heavy fall, and a splash followed, "What is the matter?" he repeated in a louder tone. There was no answer; but the moon at this moment broke out in the interval between two masses of black cloud, and the landscape again became for a few minutes clearly visible. Cressingham saw that they were close to the shore. A punt had been moored to the bank, the ice round it was broken away, and the punt pole was driven deep into the mud. It was over this that Burton had stumbled, and Cressingham could see him struggling in the water, which was several feet deep, though close in shore. He climbed into the punt, and leaning over, caught Burton by the collar. The latter had still strength enough to assist his companion's efforts, and he was presently landed, weak and shivering, but uninjured, on terra firma.

"Come along, Clem," cried Cressingham, "come as quick as you can to the cottage. We shall find shelter there at all events."

Burton obeyed as well as he was able. Leaning on Cressingham's arm he staggered along the path, which fortunately it was almost impossible to miss, and in a few minutes they reached the hut.

"Here we are at last," exclaimed Cressingham, in a tone expressive of great relief. "Why, what," he added a moment afterwards, as they came in front of the cottage window, and saw that it was lighted up, and that several figures were seated round a fire burning on the hearth. "Why, what is this? Here are a lot of fellows, and—and whoever is this—"

He broke off in still greater surprise, as a lad, who had been sitting on a stool by the fire, got up as soon as the two friends entered the hut, and grasping Burton by the hand, exclaimed, "Clem, I declare, and Fred Cressingham, too! What in the world can have brought you here?"

"George Alford!" cried Cressingham, in equal astonishment. "I thought you were a hundred miles away at the least. But there is no time for explanations now. Here's Clem, he has fallen over head and ears into the river, and he'll catch a frightful cold if he remains in his wet things. He is too much done up to talk to you now. But we'll soon set him right if you will help me."

Alford acquiesced. Burton was stripped of his clothes, wiped dry with handkerchiefs, and then seated before the fire, wrapped in some rough overcoats. Having been further recruited with a cup of hot spirits and water, which the party had been imbibing, Burton presently pronounced himself to be all right again, and called on his friend to give some account of his unexpected appearance.

"Well, Clem," said Alford, "I think I might ask for an explanation of your appearance too. Only, I suppose, I can guess it. You were on your way to Wickfield to inquire whether I had arrived—"

"You, or any letter from you, George. You know I could not speak without your permission."

"So the letter which I found on my arrival at Wickfield this afternoon said. I could not understand exactly to what you referred, but I saw you were very anxious to see me, and as it was too late to write by the mid-day post, I asked Tom and Bill Bowles here to take me over in their boat. You know the Bowles's, by the way, Clem, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Burton, laughing, "they are old acquaintances of mine, and of Fred's too. You remember that day when we took you off the Quoits, I daresay, Mr Bowles?"

"Yes, sir," answered Tom Bowles. "We've good reason to remember you and Mr Cressingham too. We were a bit rough with you that day, I am afraid, sir. I hope you'll please to excuse it. You see we might have been caught any moment by a boat from the frigate—"

"Ay, I heard something of the story," said Burton. "I suppose it was that scoundrel, Carr, set the pressgang on you?"

"Yes, sir, only there was a bigger scoundrel even than he, egging him on," replied Tom.

"What, Mr Wilcoxon, I suppose?"

"Ay, to be sure, who else?" replied Bowles. "But Mr Knyvett, he has contrived to hunt up Carr at last, and he has given information—"

"You'd better let me tell my story, Tom," interposed Alford, "and then it will all come clear. Well, as I was saying, Clem, our friends here undertook to carry me over by five o'clock to Walescliff harbour, when I should have gone up at once to Holmwood. But when we got opposite the

island here, we had the misfortune to run upon a stake, which had been driven in to hold a net, I suppose."

"By some of the pleasuring chaps, I expect," interposed Bill Bowles, "to fasten one of their boats to, and they'd never pulled it out again."

"It doesn't much matter. So much damage was done that it would take an hour or two to put right, and then the clouds were coming up, and it would evidently be dark all night. So we agreed we'd stay till morning, and get to Walescliff before breakfast. You see it didn't matter so much, because there's always a lot of wood lying about here to make a fire with, and there's a spring of water, and I had my brandy flask."

"It is a good job for me you had, George," said Burton. "But you asked me just now, or rather you said, you could not understand from my letter what I wanted. Why, of course, it was your permission to explain to Captain Gurdon—"

"Explain to Captain Gurdon?" interrupted Alford. "Why I wrote a full explanation to the Captain, and a letter to you also, telling you I had done so."

"No such letters have ever been received, George. How did you send them?"

"By the pilot—Andrew Parsons his name was, if I remember."

"Andy Parsons," repeated Bill Bowles. "If you sent them by him, it aint no wonder they didn't come to hand. He's seldom quite sober when he goes aboard a ship, and never when he comes back from one."

"And that business has never been explained then?" cried Alford.

"No, George, I could not speak without your leave. I had promised I would not. But it will be all right now. You will give your consent, I suppose, and I shall be able to tell the Doctor—"

"No, Clem, I'll go over to-morrow and tell it all myself. I am only grieved to think how much trouble you must have had on my account. Doesn't even Cressingham here know the rights of the matter?"

"Of course not, George. Didn't I promise you I would give no hint that I knew anything of your doings, since the day you left Wickfield? I have never been released from that promise. But I think it will be better for you to go over to the Priory to-morrow as you propose, and give an explanation, which everyone—Captain Gurdon, Thornton, Hepburn, and all the school—will hear. That will be better than my doing it, and Fred, I daresay, won't mind waiting till then. Still I should like to hear at once what has been happening to you since we parted that morning, if you don't mind telling it. I suppose you don't mind either Fred here, or the Bowles's knowing it, do you?"

"Not at all. Every one is welcome to know it, so far as I am concerned, and Tom and Bill here do know it pretty well already. But do I understand that you have never received any letter at all from me since the 19th of August last?"

"I have never received any letter at all. I did hear from Frank Knyvett that you had written to him, but the letter contained no message for me."

"That is strange. But it is of no consequence now. Well, then, I'll begin at the beginning. You know I had taken my passage for New Orleans, and was going to sail from Curlew

on the very day of our parting. I had discovered, through Frank Knyvett, you know, that Wilcoxon had found out something about my plans. He knew that I was intending to leave England; and probably suspected that I was going to New Orleans, to find out anything about Major Baynton that could be learned. It did not at all suit him to let me go on such an errand, and he had devised a scheme to prevent it ——"

"How do you suppose he found out anything about it?" asked Burton.

"Well, you know I had to raise the money to pay my passage to New York, and afterwards to New Orleans, and though I went as a steerage passenger a good bit of money was wanted. I had been saving up my money for months past, and I sold a watch and some seals which my father had given me, and the Bowles's lent me a few sovereigns and you some more, and so I made it up. But I have an idea that the jeweller to whom I sold the things told Wilcoxon about it. Anyhow he had taken his measures to prevent it. Frank warned me that he was going to send me the very next day, he believed, to a fellow living in the north of Scotland, in the Hebrides, I think, who professed to take pupils. Frank knew something of the man and of the place. He said I should be half-starved and moped to death. I was to be kept without money, and even if I had it, it would be very difficult for me to get away from the island. I was to be kept there in fact, till I knocked under about the clerkship.

"The only chance was for me to be off at once. So I came over to you, as you know, and then went on to Haverport Roads, where the ship was lying. I reached her only just in time. She

was actually weighing anchor when I went on board. We had a good passage down channel, and as far as the Irish Coast; but a day or two afterwards there were contrary winds, and we didn't reach New York till the end of the first week in October. Half-way between Newfoundland and the American Coast there was an opportunity of sending letters to England, and I wrote both to you and to Frank Knyvett. I wrote to him a second letter soon after we landed."

"He had your second letter, George. Neither of the others came to hand."

"Ah, then, it must have been as I feared. I remember there were heavy gales soon afterwards. I suppose the *New England Star* must have been lost. Well, to go on. My first step after reaching New York was to secure a passage for New Orleans. I went down to the packet office for the purpose. There was a great crowd of people about, and it was a long time before I could get attended to. While I was standing about waiting for my turn to come, I felt, all of a moment, a slap on the back, and heard a fellow saying, 'Why, it is George Alford, I declare, or else his twin brother! What can have brought you to this part of the world, my lad?'

"I turned round, and there, looking me full in the face, was the very man I had come out to look after, the man whom I had almost made up my mind to believe dead, my guardian, Major Baynton himself ——"

"By Jove, you don't mean that!" exclaimed Burton. "That was a go! I wish you joy with all my heart! Where had he been all those months?"

George proceeded to inform him in a narrative, which we will abridge for the reader's benefit.

Major Baynton, or Colonel as he should more properly be called, having attained that rank soon after landing in America, had led one of the attacks on the cotton ramparts of New Orleans on the disastrous 5th of January 1815. He had been cut down in a sortie by the enemy, and left for dead on the field. The ruffians who never fail to plunder the dying and the dead after every battle, had stripped him of his uniform and sword, leaving nothing on his person by which his name or rank could be determined. The sabre cut which had prostrated him had inflicted some injury on the brain, causing stupor lasting for some eighteen months, during all which time the patient had never regained consciousness. When at last reason and memory slowly returned to him, he found that peace with England had long been concluded, and he was free to return thither whensoever he pleased. He learned also the stirring incidents of the "hundred days," the glories of Waterloo, and the terrible loss of life by which they had been purchased. In the *Gazette* of that sanguinary day he read with deep regret the name of his friend George Alford.

"Poor Alford," he exclaimed, with a sigh, "his death will be a heavy blow to his son—that nice lad! I wonder what has become of him by this time. His father has been dead more than a year. And, by the way, he made me the boy's guardian, or one of his guardians. Well, I shall be returning to England as soon as I can arrange my affairs, and then I can make inquiries about him."

It was early in September when the Colonel made this discovery, and about three weeks afterwards he took his passage for England by way of New York, encountering George Alford, as the reader has heard, in one of the quays belonging to that city.

"Well," said George, "the moment I met him all was right again. He told me I was quite right as to my father's intentions respecting me. He had not only always meant that I should go into the army as soon as I entered on my seventeenth year, but had left full instructions to his executors to carry out his intentions in events of his dying before their fulfilment. A copy of these, in Colonel Alford's own handwriting, had been sent to Major Baynton at the time when the Colonel left England for the Peninsula. The original had remained with the will, which had been left with Mrs Alford. Doubtless it had fallen into Mr Wilcoxon's hands, and by him, it would appear, had been suppressed.

"'But it will be all right now, my lad,' Colonel Baynton said to me, when I had told him all that had taken place since my father's death. 'We are not going to leave New York for a fortnight yet, and I'll write to Mr Wilcoxon by the packet, which sails to-day, such a letter as will put a stop to his designs on you and on your money too.'

"Well, Clem, we stayed our fortnight in New York, and I never enjoyed anything more in all my life. Colonel Baynton is the jolliest fellow, I think, in the whole world. He took me everywhere about with him, and set me up in clothes and pocket money, and paid my passage home.

"We parted at Plymouth. He had to go up to London for a few days, and I came on to Wickfield, which, as I told you, I reached to-day. What do you think was the first thing I heard from Frank Knyvett, on my arriving there?"

"I can't say, I am sure, George," returned Burton. "I suppose old Wilcoxon hadn't hanged himself, had he?"

"Well, no, he hadn't exactly done that. But he had done

the next thing to it. He had sold his nail factory, his house and furniture, and left Wickfield—left England, it was believed, carrying my stepmother away with him."

"A good riddance, George," said Cressingham, "if all I have heard is true. But what made him do that? I thought his business at Wickfield was supposed to be a thriving one; and though he was disappointed in his attempts to get hold of your money, or make you his clerk, I don't see what Colonel Baynton could have done to him."

"I am not clear on that point," said Alford. "Frank Kynvett told me that his father had said it would be an awkward thing for Mr Wilcoxon, if it could be proved that the paper of instructions to Colonel Alford's executors had been left with Mrs Alford, and by her handed to her present husband. His attempts to appropriate the Colonel's money to benefit his own business, in the teeth of his own written directions, would be an ugly fact if it was brought into any court. But I don't suppose that was his main reason for selling his property and leaving Wickfield. Tom Bowles here could give you a better reason. Couldn't you, Tom?"

"Well, sir, I could give you a pretty good one. Lawyer Knyvett—he aint a bad man of business, Mr Burton—he has routed out this man Carr, who was the chap that set the press-gang upon us. Mr Knyvett knew something of this Carr—was consarned, I fancy, in some trial for assault and robbery with which a man named Clark charged him. When he was took up by the constables for the false evidence he gave the officer of the press-gang, Mr Knyvett threatened him, if he didn't tell the whole truth of his dealings with Wilcoxon, that he'd bring up the old charge against him. Carr he

got frightened, and he told the whole. He said Wilcoxon had been down to him and put him up to lending us the thousand pounds, and then coming upon us for it again as soon as he thought we'd spent it; and when that didn't do, he promised Carr fifty if he'd get us carried aboard one of the ships that was just agoing to sail against Algiers. He sent Carr some paper, which pretended to be a conviction of Bill and myself for some felony, which took the liftenant in ——"

"The lieutenant of the *Enterprise* you mean?" said Cressingham.

"Yes, of the *Enterprise*, sir, and the liftenant, thinking the paper was all right, wouldn't listen to us, and when we cut up rough, he put us into irons. It was a near go, sir. If it hadn't happened that Bill there had been buying a couple of files that very morning to sharpen his saw, we should have been taken to Algiers, and as likely as not knocked on the head. But they didn't suspect we'd got the files, and we worked with them all the night, and before the day began to break, we made our escape."

"And Mr Knyvett threatened Mr Wilcoxon to bring up this man Carr's evidence against him, hey?" asked Cressingham.

"Well, sir, he took care Mr Wilcoxon should know he'd found it all out. I don't exactly know what means he took to let him know it, but he did, and Wilcoxon judged it better to clear off while he could. Any way he is gone, and the nail factory's shut up, and I hope it won't be opened again."

"I hope it won't Tom," assented Alford, "or if it is, that it will be opened by a different sort of fellow from Wilcoxon. Well now, Clem, it is getting pretty late. You had better put

on your clothes again, which are now quite dry, and we'll lie down to sleep before the fire. What time had we better start in the morning, Tom? You must settle that."

"Well, Mr George, there aint no good in setting off too early. We'll set about mending the boat, as soon as it's light, and if we start by ten o'clock, it will be time enough."

"Ten o'clock; very good. We shall be at Walescliff a little after eleven. Mr Knyvett and Frank are to meet us at the King's Arms at half-past eleven. And then we'd all go together to the Priory."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE ANSWER AT LAST.

Dr Thornton did not return to the Priory until just before morning school, and he had, in consequence, no time to receive the matron's report after breakfast, as was his wont. This was some relief to that lady, who was a good deal troubled to know what had become of Burton and Cressingham. Burton had requested that he might not be disturbed in the morning. His room, accordingly, had not been visited until eight o'clock, when it was found that he had quitted it. As his bed had not been made on the previous day, no suspicions were entertained that he had not slept in it. Presently the maid who had charge of Cressingham's room came to report that his bed had not been occupied. Supposing, however, that the boy had chosen to pass the night in his friend's room, even this did not rouse suspicion. But when neither of the boys appeared at breakfast, and inquiries after them failed to elicit any satisfactory answer, the matron became uneasy. If the missing boys had borne a bad character for irregularity and disobedience, it would at once have been surmised that they were playing truant—a trick, it may be remarked in passing, much more common in those days than the present. But Burton

and Cressingham were two of the steadiest boys in the school. They had been many years at Holmwood, and had never on any occasion broken the rules to any serious extent; and it was impossible to suppose that they had run away. Mrs Edwards was inclined to believe that they must have gone to the Doctor for some purpose, and contented herself with making a few inquiries from any persons whom she met, as to whether they had seen them. About eleven o'clock Mr Eaton, the butcher, who had just arrived from Walescliff, was able to answer her questions.

"Mr Burton and Mr Cressingham?" he said. "Yes, I see 'em last night—see 'em in Walescliff, in the bar of the 'Anchor Inn,' ma'am."

"Last night, in the bar of the Anchor Inn, Mr Eaton!" repeated the horrified matron. "Why, you're joking, to be sure."

"No, I aint," repeated the butcher. "Never was more serious."

"Well then, you must be mistaken," rejoined the lady.

"I aint that either," said the other. "I know Mr Burton and Mr Cressingham by sight as well as I know you, Mrs Edwards. I had gone down to speak to the landlord about that horse of mine he thinks of buying; and I was standing in the bar, when the two young gentlemen came in. They had got a letter with them, and wanted Jack Landy to ride with it somewhere—to Wickfield, I fancy. But he couldn't take it. He'd gone to drive a gentleman to Wandesborough Castle. I heard it all as plain as I heard you speaking just now, Mrs Edwards."

"Well, what happened then, Mr Eaton?" asked Mrs

Edwards. "What did they do when they found Landy couldn't take it?"

"Well, I can't be sure," answered the butcher. "One of them said something about the letter going somehow or other, and they went off by the footpath towards Speneleigh Wood. I suppose they meant to ask Mr Grimes to take it. I had half a mind to offer to send it myself, they seemed so anxious about it. But my horse had been out all the afternoon and was tired, so I didn't speak to them."

"The Doctor must hear this," exclaimed the matron. "They must have run away after all! Whoever would have thought that of two such quiet gentlemen! I think we're all bewitched, I do! Where is the Doctor, Tom?" she continued, turning to the school servant?

"The Doctor is in school," replied Cobbe, "but it will be over in forty minutes. If I might presume to advise, it would be better to wait till then."

"Very well, Tom. Meanwhile there will be just time for you to run down to Grimes's cottage, and enquire if he knows anything about this."

Meanwhile school had been proceeding as usual, notwithstanding that the four head boys of the first class were absent. At about a quarter to twelve o'clock, however, a message was brought in by one of the maids—Cobbe, it appeared, being absent—to say that Mr Lumley had driven over, and was now in the Doctor's study anxious to see him as soon as it would be convenient. The Doctor hurried out, and found his visitor in a state of considerable anxiety and bewilderment.

"I have this morning received a letter from my ward, Stephen Graves," he said, "which I cannot understand, and

which induced me to drive over immediately to talk to you about it."

"Sit down, Mr Lumley," said the Doctor. "I did not expect this, but am not greatly surprised. What does Stephen say?"

"He speaks of some unfounded charge having been suddenly revived against him, and of his having been suspected of some offence—he does not say what—without sufficient evidence—indeed, notwithstanding that there was clear evidence of another person's guilt. He wants me to send and fetch him away immediately. Of course, I am not going to do that. Whatever charge may have been made against him ought to be thoroughly gone into, and its truth or falsehood made clear, before I could take any step of that kind."

"You are quite right, Mr Lumley. The whole matter referred to—a most intricate and perplexing one—ought to be fully elucidated before it is allowed to drop. I need not tell you, I trust, that I am anxious to do the fullest justice to your ward."

Mr Lumley bowed. "Certainly," he said, "I do not require to be told that. Let me add that I think you have done him justice in the fullest sense of the word. Indeed, for the last two or three months your reports of him have been highly satisfactory. That fact was one of those which caused me so much perplexity."

"He has indeed being doing unusually well," said the headmaster; "admirably, I may say. I had felt convinced that this charge, which had almost been forgotten, had no foundation so far as he was concerned. But it was revived yesterday by Captain Gurdon, the owner of a valuable dog which has

been shot, and Stephen unfortunately refuses to give any explanation of certain circumstances, which—though they would not absolutely prove the case against him, even if their truth could be fully established—are nevertheless full of very grave suspicion. I hope your presence may induce him to speak out."

"It is the fault of his character," said Mr Lumley. "He is, I believe, incapable of meanness or falsehood, but there is a sullen haughtiness about him which will not stoop to explanation. I will do my best, though I'll by no means answer, after the experience I have had of him, that I shall succeed. It will be, however, necessary, in the first place, that I should understand the matter in question, of which, as yet, I have no knowledge."

Doctor Thornton accordingly entered into a full explanation of the affair of the 19th of August, to which Mr Lumley listened, asking various questions as the narrative proceeded. It had hardly come to a conclusion when Cobbe, who had now returned, announced Colonel Wilder, Captain Gurdon, and Baines. It being now past twelve o'clock, the whole party adjourned to the school-room to re-commence the enquiry.

The boys were all drawn up in school order, with the ushers at their desks, intense interest expressed on each face. "Let Temple and Graves be brought down," said the Doctor. "Mr Wilkes, will you be so good as to fetch them?"

"You ought to be informed, sir," said Mr Hepburn, as the usher left the room, that two of the head boys of the school—Burton and Cressingham—are not to be found."

"Not to be found, Mr Hepburn?" exclaimed the head-master in surprise; "what do you mean? I thought Burton

was ill, and Cressingham had been allowed to sit with him."

"That was the case yesterday, sir; but it appears that they went out about six o'clock last night, and have never returned."

"You must be dreaming, Mr Hepburn," exclaimed Dr Thornton.

"I thought so myself, sir, when I first heard it. But it certainly is so. Eaton, the butcher, saw them in Walescliff somewhere about six o'clock, and Captain Grimes met them near the entrance of Speneleigh wood a quarter of an hour later. It appears they were going to Wickfield. They wanted to borrow Grimes's pony to ride there, but he refused to lend it to them."

There was a silence of a minute or two, while the boys stared at one another in blank amazement. At last the headmaster again spoke.

"I cannot conceive what this can mean, and the moment this present affair is settled, I shall go over to Wickfield and make inquiries. Meanwhile we had better proceed at once. Baines, have you any further evidence to produce?"

"No, sir," answered the constable, "I don't see what further evidence could be produced, unless some one had actually seen the dog shot, which aint very likely, or he'd have come forward long ago."

"Very well then, your presence will not be needed here. Will you be so good as to go down into Walescliff and learn anything you can about these two boys? Captain Gurdon," he resumed, as the door closed upon Baines, "have you learnt anything further?"

"No, sir," returned the Captain. "I am of the same

opinion as Baines. I do not think any further evidence will ever be discovered. One of these two did it, and I, for my part, have no doubt which it was."

"You mean that my ward did it, Captain Gurdon," said Mr Lumley. "I cannot agree with you. Having heard the whole case, I cannot but assent so far to your opinion as to think that one of the two is guilty, but I do not think that one is Stephen Graves."

"For my part," said Colonel Wilder, "I also think that one or the other of these two lads must surely be the culprit. But the evidence is so exactly balanced, that I am wholly unable to say which of the two did it."

"It remains only," said the Doctor, "that I make one last appeal to the boys themselves. Temple and Graves, whatever doubts there may be in any of our minds, there can be none in yours as to your guilt or innocence. I implore you to speak out and tell the whole truth. Whichever of you may be guilty, the only hope he can have of atoning for his fault, the only mode by which he can avoid doing deeper wrong to his schoolfellow than he has already done, is by a full, though it must be added tardy, confession. Nor can he possibly benefit himself, even so far as this Hawley prize is concerned. The grave cloud of suspicion which rests upon both renders it impossible that I could award it to either of them. Under any circumstances, indeed, I doubt whether I could do so after what has recently come to light. But it would be wholly impossible while the offender in this matter remains undetected."

"Speak out, Stephen," said Mr Lumley. "If, as I believe, you are entirely innocent in this matter, it will be the right, as well as wise, course for you to do so. If injustice has been

done you, nothing will be so likely to set it right as perfect openness."

"Speak out, Charley," said Captain Gurdon, stepping up to Temple and laying his hand on the lad's shoulder. "I know you didn't do it. The only thing that can make that seem doubtful, would be your refusal to speak."

"I am willing to speak now," said Temple. "I did not like to do so before, because I should have got Harry Wilder into trouble. I did go out on the morning of the 19th to fetch the pistol-case, which I had left overnight under the arch of the old drain. But I did not shoot Neptune, and I do not know who did."

"And the compunction which I heard you express to Harry Wilder about the dog's death," said Mr Hepburn. "How do you explain that?"

"It was my carelessness in leaving the pistol about, which caused the poor old fellow to be shot," said Temple. "I shall always be sorry for that."

"And you, Stephen?" said Mr Lumley. "Will not you be equally explicit? Did you go out that morning, and how is the tear in your trousers to be accounted for?"

"I did go out—to fetch the pistols in. I tore the piece out of my trousers against a nail in getting out of the window. I did not kill the dog. I saw nothing of him as I went back to the house."

There was again an embarrassed silence. The Doctor seemed about to speak, when suddenly the door was opened, and Burton and Cressingham, accompanied by a lad of their own age, and a tall gentleman, whom all present recognized as Mr Knyvett, entered the room.

"Knyvett, I declare!" said Colonel Wilder. "I am uncommonly glad to see you here. We want your help particularly in this strange affair."

"I meant to have been half an hour and more ago," said Mr Knyvett, "but I was detained."

"Burton and Cressingham!" exclaimed the Doctor almost at the same moment. "Well, anyway, I am glad to see you back. Where have you been, and who is your companion—what? George—George Alford! Why, I heard that you were—that you had—"

"That I had left England, Dr Thornton. So I had. I shall hope to be able to explain everything that may seem strange by and bye. But first, if you please, I have something to say to Captain Gurdon."

He stepped up to the Captain, who was looking on as much surprised as the others.

"I have to beg your pardon, sir, for having done you an injury, as well as caused you, I fear, a great deal of distress, but I did not do either willingly. It was I who shot Neptune, Captain Gurdon. I hope you will forgive me."

"You—you, my lad!" exclaimed the old officer, with whom during his school days George Alford had always been a favourite. "How could you have done it, and what did you do it for?"

"It would be a long story to tell, sir, there were reasons why I wished to leave England very suddenly, and without it being known that I was going to do so—"

"Reasons," interposed Mr Knyvett, "which were in no way discreditable to George. I do not say that he might not have acted more prudently, and probably would have done so,

if he had been seven and thirty instead of seventeen. But situated as he was, it would be hard indeed to blame him, I myself at the same age should, in all likelihood, have done the same."

George Alford bowed and went on. "I wanted to see Burton, and two boatmen from Wickfield brought me over to Hanger's Cave, where I was fortunate enough to meet Burton alone. I was short of money, and had come to ask if he could help me. He told me he could lend me three or four pounds; but there would not be time for him to go up to the Priory to fetch them before the house was locked up. I could not go up there myself, because everybody would know me; and I could not wait till next day, because my ship was to sail from Haverport Roads early on the following morning. Finding it could be managed in no other way, Clement told me that he had accidentally found out, some time before, that there was a mode of getting out of the Priory by a passage which ran through the wall of one of the out-houses in the back-yard— "

"*You* knew of this passage, Burton?" said the Doctor in a tone of displeased surprise. "I really did not expect this."

"I can explain that, sir," said Temple. "Burton saw me coming in that way early one morning a long time ago. I saw him looking out of the window of his bedroom as I came up. His room is the only one in the house which looks that way. I saw plainly that he had discovered the manner by which I had got in, and I expected him to say something to me about it. But he never did, and I am quite sure he has never made any use of it."

"And how did you come to know of it yourself, Temple?"

"It was told me by one of the boys several years ago, just before he left," said Temple. "He made me promise I would never say anything about it to any one, till I was just on the point of leaving."

"I shall see this back way walled up without loss of time. Meanwhile go on, George,"

"Well, sir, Burton said he did not like going out that way, he had never done so, and he meant never to do so. But rather than I should be prevented leaving England, he would get out that way, and meet me early next morning. I daresay it was wrong, sir; but if so, the blame ought to rest almost entirely on me. I had told Clement what a strait I was in, and we have always been like brothers, you know."

"He risked his life for me once," said Burton, speaking as it seemed more to himself, than to any one else. "I *couldn't* refuse to help him."

There was something like a cheer among the boys, old Captain Gurdon's voice being one of those who applauded. The headmaster checked it, though with a smile, and simply said, "Go on George."

"Well," resumed Alford. "We remained concealed—the two Bowles and myself—in Hanger's Cave all night. It was a terrible time, as I daresay you will remember—such a storm as hasn't been known they say for years past; but about three o'clock it lulled, and I went straight up to the Priory. I found I was a little too soon, and kept close to the wall at the back of the house, out of sight of the windows. That was the place you had appointed for our meeting, Clem."

Burton nodded, and the speaker went on.

"While I was kicking my heels about, I saw lying on the ground, under a small archway, a shallow mahogany box, and I took it up to examine it. I found it was a case containing a brace of very handsome, though old-fashioned pistols. Thinking some one must have lost them, I took out one to see if there was any name or address upon it. All of a moment I heard a sudden rush behind me and was nearly knocked over by a large bloodhound which had seized me by the leg, or rather by the trousers, for my Wellington boots had fortunately been too strong for his teeth to penetrate. I saw that in another moment he would spring at my throat; and if he were to do so, it would certainly be all over with me. Hardly knowing what I did in the hurry of the moment, I let fly at him with the pistol. The ball, I suppose, must have pierced his heart, for he fell down dead in a moment. I wasn't a bit hurt, though it was a hard job for me to drag my trousers out of the grip of his teeth. I threw the pistol away, and was just going to make a bolt for it, when Clem called to me, and I saw him close by."

"What is this, Clem?" I asked. "What dog is that?"

"I am sorry to say it is poor Neptune, Captain Gurdon's dog," he answered. "It has been at Holmwood about a year, and is a general favourite. But I saw what happened. You couldn't help it."

"No, of course he couldn't," said Burton. "The dog, I suppose, saw me as I was crossing the court and followed me. I didn't see or hear him, until just as I was getting out at the end of the drain, and then he pushed by me and sprang upon George before I could interfere. I too think George would have been killed, if he hadn't shot him. I don't think any one

could be more sorry than I was; but George only did it to save his life."

"That is true," said Alford. "I wish I could have gone to Captain Gurdon and told him what had happened. But that, of course, was impossible. Indeed it wouldn't do for me to stay there another minute. Clem just gave me the money; we shook hands, and I ran off. I found the two Bowles's ready to start. They had got the boat down, and we were off immediately. There was a very heavy swell, and what with that and the strong current round Crawley Point, they only just contrived to reach the Nereid as she was on the very point of starting. I had meant to write a letter to you, Captain Gurdon, explaining all that had happened, but there wasn't a moment in which I could do so. There was only just time to heave my box on board and scramble up myself before she was fairly under weigh. I did write, however, two letters, one to Captain Gurdon the other to Clement, and gave them to the pilot, who promised to post them as soon as he reached the shore. I was afraid, however, from what I learnt afterwards that he was not to be trusted. They said, if I wanted him to take my letters right, I ought not to have paid him beforehand. Any way, I fear you never got the letter, Captain."

"No, my lad," answered Gurdon. "I didn't got the letter. I wish I had, with all my heart, as it would have saved a deal of trouble and mistake. But, any way, I am glad I have learnt the truth now. Shake hands, George. It's an unlucky business; but it would be hard to blame you for it. I know you'd no more willingly have hurt my poor old favourite, than I would myself. I'm very glad, too, to find that my friend,

Charlie Temple, has been suspected without reason. I was as sure as I could be of any thing, that he too would never have hurt poor old Nep intentionally, and if he had done it accidentally, would have come and told me of it. I'm also bound to add that I am sorry—heartily sorry for having suspected Graves without reason. Graves, I ask your pardon," he continued, walking up to the boy named. "Let us shake hands upon it."

Graves gave him his hand, though he said nothing.

"Well then, sir," said Mr Hepburn, "I suppose we may conclude that this matter is settled and done with, and that I may read out the list of marks, which I made up finally last night; and that the boy whose name stands at the head of the list will receive the Hawley prize."

"I cannot quite say that, Mr Hepburn;" said the Doctor gravely. The four head boys in the school are Burton, Temple, Graves, and Cressingham. Most strangely, as well as most unfortunately, very serious matters have been charged against all these four. None of them, I rejoice to think, is guilty of the offence which has caused us so much trouble throughout the last few months. Graves indeed, I consider to deserve no further blame. He has already been punished for the possession of the pistols, and the fact of his having gone out early in the morning to receive them from a person who brought them from the coach office is not a serious enough matter to oblige me to place a second black cross before his name. But I have had no explanation of the strange conduct of Burton and Cressingham in leaving the house yesterday and remaining out all night ——"

"I can explain that, sir," said Alford. "Clement has

throughout been anxious that Graves and Temple should be relieved from the unjust suspicion he knew to be hanging over them; but he could not disclose the truth, without betraying me. He has written several times to Frank Knyvett, to ask him if he had heard anything of my return. A few days ago Frank wrote him word that I should be in Wickfield in two days' time; and so I should have been, if the ship had not been delayed four-and-twenty hours at Plymouth. He wrote again intreating me to come here immediately; and last night, supposing that his letter had miscarried, he set off himself to Wickfield to find me and bring me here in time to-day."

"Humph!" said the Doctor, "and he reached Wickfield and passed the night there did he?"

"No, sir." He fell in with me on the Green Holm. We passed the night in the cottage there, and came on this morning."

"And you, Cressingham?" pursued the Doctor.

"I was afraid to let Burton go alone, sir," answered Cressingham.

"Yes, sir," said Burton, "but he did all he could to dissuade me from going. He thought I was ill, though I was really only anxious and uneasy. I tried to persuade him too to stay at home, but he wouldn't."

"Dr Thornton, you must not be hard on these lads," exclaimed Mr Lumley. "I should be proud of them if they belonged to me."

"And so should I," added Mr Knyvett.

"I wish I had had two such subs in my regiment," remarked Colonel Wilder.

"Or middies aboard my ship," supplemented Captain Gurdon.

"I don't know that I altogether disagree with you," said the headmaster, smiling. "But we have still Temple's case to consider. He too has been acquitted of the grave offence with which he stood charged. But what am I to think of his having gone out by this secret way for an unlawful purpose. I cannot tell how often he may have used it. I know that Mr Hepburn, in whose judgment I greatly confide, has often expressed an opinion about him—"

"May I ask your indulgence for one moment, sir," interposed Mr Hepburn. "It is true that I have for years past entertained a very low opinion of Charles Temple—an opinion which not even the excellence of his behaviour and his extraordinary diligence during the last three months had greatly altered. But I was present accidentally at a conversation between him and his friend Harry Wilder two days ago, which satisfied me that on more than one point I had done him great injustice. As some atonement for that, may I too be permitted to request that this last offence may be overlooked. Indeed, I feel that, considering the very trying circumstances under which it was committed, it ought not to be allowed to weigh down the good conduct and hard work of so many weeks."

"Hepburn, you're a good fellow," exclaimed Captain Gurdon. "Give us your hand and let us be friends. Thornton, I am sure you won't refuse Mr Hepburn's petition."

"No," said the headmaster. "I see pretty plainly, if I did, I should have every one against me. Well, read out the

register of marks, Mr Hepburn. The first on it, whoever he is, shall have the prize."

"Then I have to announce," said the usher, "that Temple is the winner, but only by two marks. The numbers are—

| | |
|---|---|
| Temple, - - - - - - - - | 562 |
| Graves, - - - - - - - - | 560 |
| Burton, - - - - - - - - | 539 |

I ought to add that Graves's work since August last has been fully as good as that of Temple. He has indeed rather gained upon his antagonist than lost since that time. It was only the accident, if I may so call it, of Temple's being two or three in advance at the commencement of the struggle, which has enabled him to win. Mr Lumley will, I am sure, be glad to hear that."

"I am, indeed, extremely glad to hear it," said Mr Lumley. "There is an idea, I am told, in the school that Stephen has only worked in this manner in order to earn money enough to buy a gun and pistols, which he has long been anxious to possess. I know from his letters to me that it was a worthier impulse than that, though not perhaps the worthiest of all, that has made him so exert himself. He thought he had been unfairly judged, and wished to prove the fact by his success. I need not say I shall take care that he is well rewarded."

"And you, Burton?" said the Doctor.

"I am very glad, sir," returned the boy. "I have been afraid for weeks past that Temple would lose this, and it would be most unjust if he did, but I did not know how to help it."

"Well," said the Doctor, "I am, after all, inclined to believe that, notwithstanding all these troubles and anxieties, I have reason to be proud of my senior boys. Yet I am inclined to

add a word or two nevertheless. Why is it that boys can be faithful to one another, and show generosity and self-denial so far as they are concerned, but cannot display those qualities towards their masters? Why is it they can trust one another, but cannot trust us? Here is George Alford—he was my pupil for many years. So are Burton, Cressingham, Graves, and Temple. When did I ever break faith with any one of them? when did I ever show myself anything but their truest and best friend? Yet not one of them, it seems, can trust me. George Alford will not come up to the house, for fear I might abuse any confidence he might repose in me. Temple and Graves will neither of them confide to me the true facts of the case—I suppose, for the same reason. Burton does not ask me to send over immediately to Wickfield to fetch Alford, or beg me to suspend my decision till Alford arrives. Cressingham, again, allows his friend to go on what he considers a dangerous expedition, and embarks in it himself, rather than reveal his difficulty to me. Yet I could have relieved all these boys from the troubles and anxieties they have been undergoing for months past, and would have done so most willingly. Apparently there is a gulf between masters and boys which we in this generation cannot pass. All I can hope is that they who shall come after us may prove more successful."

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